

FROM JAPAN'S
MASTER OF HORROR
AND CREATOR OF
VAMPIRE HUNTER D!

・ 魔界都市新宿 ・

DEMON CITY SHINJUKU

THE COMPLETE EDITION

WRITTEN BY:
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

ILLUSTRATED BY:
JUN SUEMI

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

DEMON CITY
SHINJUKU
THE COMPLETE EDITION

Author's Bio

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in 1949 in the city of Choshi in Chiba Prefecture. He graduated from Aoyama University. His debut novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*, was published in 1982, followed by a creative outpouring that included *Vampire Hunter D*, *Demon City Blues*, *Youma Battlefront*, *Demon Physician Mephisto* and many more manga and novels. He is a member of the Japan Mystery Writers Association, and is a well-known fan of science fiction and horror movies.

Artist's Bio

After graduating from Musashino Art University in 1983 with a degree in oil painting, Jun Suemi devoted himself to *oshie*, the traditional Japanese craft of raised cloth art. He has gained a following for his book covers, book bindings, and game character designs. In 1988, he received a “best artist” Nebula Award (Japan) for his work in science fiction and fantasy.

Starting with his compilation of illustrations for the *Wizardry* game platform, he has released *Labyrinth* (CD-ROM), *The Guin Saga*, *Deep*, *Spirit*, *Witching Moon* and other art books and collections.

DEMON CITY SHINJUKU

THE COMPLETE EDITION

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
JUN SUEMI

English Translation by
EUGENE WOODBURY



Demon City Shinjuku: The Complete Edition Demon City Shinjuku/Makai
Toshi Shinjuku Complete Edition (c) Hideyuki Kikuchi 2005. Originally
published in Japan in 2007 by ASAHI Shimbun Company. English translation
copyright (c) 2011 by DIGITAL MANGA, Inc. All other material (c) 2011 by
DIGITAL MANGA, Inc. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may
be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written
permission from the copyright holders. Any likeness of characters, places, and
situations featured in this publication to actual persons (living or deceased),
events, places, and situations are purely coincidental. All characters depicted in
sexually explicit scenes in this publication are at least the age of consent or older.
The DMP logo is © of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

Written by Hideyuki Kikuchi Illustrated by Jun Suemi

English Translation by Eugene Woodbury English Edition Published by:

DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING

A division of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

1487 W 178th Street, Suite 300

Gardena, CA 90248

USA

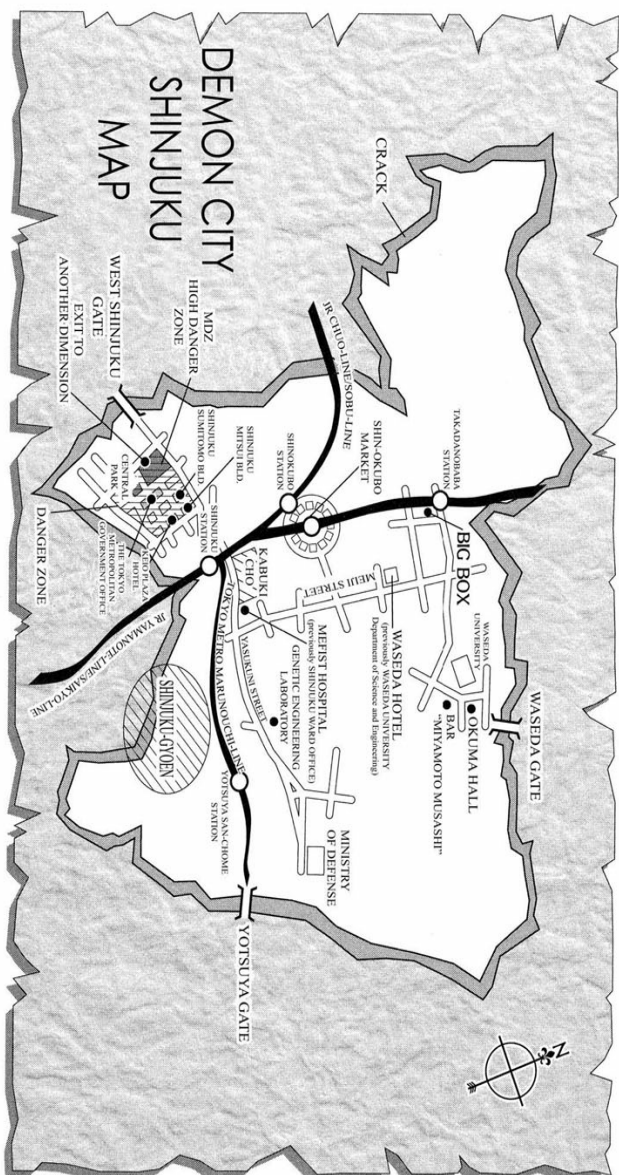
www.dmpbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available Upon Request
First Edition: July 2011

ISBN-13: 978-1-56970-208-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada



DEMON CITY
SHINJUKU

Demon City Shinjuku

Prologue

The hour grew nigh.

It was the thirteenth of September, a night early in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. In the police box near the entrance to Shinjuku station, a young officer finished his paperwork, got up from his desk, and stretched mightily.

A great feeling of relief flooded his body. The cop was clad in a reinforced ballistic helmet and thick Kevlar vest. One way or another, he'd made it through another day.

His eyes were drawn to the digital clock on the desk. Two fifty-nine in the morning. The shopping district in front of the station was wrapped in darkness. The stores had shuttered their doors and rolled up the sidewalks. The foot traffic was sparse. Taxis were few and far between.

This time of night, the only hustle and bustle was in the direction of Kabukicho.

Even so, there was no letting down his guard. In this town, anything cop-related was bound to end up in somebody's crosshairs, no matter what the time of day. A terrorist or just a bunch of juvenile delinquents looking for a thrill could come calling with a black market Tokarev semi-auto or handmade grenades.

His mind flashed back to the night's logbook: 29 injuries or accidents, 34 muggings, 23 robbery-assaults, 80 cases of larceny and 17 homicides. These last three or four years had turned the new millennium into a real doozy.

Comparably speaking, though, it'd been a relatively quiet day.

He went outside to get a breath of fresh air. The cool night was an early harbinger of fall. The stars twinkled in an unusually clear sky. A thought came

to him out of the blue—*what was this time of night called again?*

The clock silently flipped over to three o'clock. The cop was overcome by a strange feeling of disquiet. Studio Alta and Mitsui Sumitomo Bank jutted out of the blackness before him, steadily reaching into the sky.

No—the buildings weren't rising up. He was sinking down into the earth.

That was when his previous question came back to him. The *witching hour*, the time when the devil held sway, and humans and monsters crossed paths. The police officer wasn't exactly right about the time, but he was nevertheless correct—this moment was a meeting between man and magic.

After the swaying came the roar.

The eight stories above the "My City" subway station mall leaned way over. Unable to absorb the violent shaking and pitching, the pillars and steel beams bent and broke. The tearing of pipes and rebar drowned out the screaming alarms.

The bedrock-like concrete subfloors pancaked. The display windows and showcases, piled high with garish goods, crashed down like an avalanche.

An earthquake like none before struck without the slightest warning.

The night clubbers wandering down Shinjuku Avenue didn't have a chance. No sooner did they feel the ground shaking beneath their feet, than they were thrown dozens of feet into the air. And then hurling to the ground like trampoline artists missing their marks before they knew what had happened.

The street filled with screams. Rolling on the ground as if bucked from the backs of wild stallions, the young men and women watched as Takano, Mitsukoshi, Isetan—the very edifices that symbolized their vibrant and beautiful lives—came crashing to the ground.

No earthquake-resistant construction existed that could resist such plutonian forces. Razor-sharp shards of window glass rained down, as if taking aim at their bodies. Thousand-ton blocks of concrete delivered the merciful *coup de grace*.

This late at night in this commercial district, around the station the human

carnage was relatively light.

The clubs and bars in Kabuki-cho—the town that never slept—were packed. The military personnel at the Ministry of Defense barracks in Ichigaya were coming off a hard day of training and slumbering peacefully. The student housing in Takada no Baba and Waseda, the quiet residential neighborhoods of Ochiai and Yaraicho—most were swallowed up by the earth.

Before becoming the slightest bit aware of their impending fate, they were crushed by great volumes of weight into another geological sedimentary layer.

The earthquake lasted all of three seconds.

Just as there were no preliminary tremors, there were no aftershocks. Shinjuku was destroyed in a single shrug of the earth's crust.

But it would still take a long time until it drew its last breath.

Flames from the stoves in the all-night restaurants and taverns ignited the gas pouring from ruptured lines. Petrol flooded from gas stations onto the streets and added another conflagration to the blood and cries. Every way out was blocked by high-tension wires sparking like fireworks and the smoldering remains of houses and shops.

The poisonous flowers of flame sprang open as if after a spring rain. The sooty black smoke wrapped itself like a blanket around the barely living as the screams and shouts went on, it seemed, forever.

A magnitude 8.5 earthquake had struck directly beneath the city center. The epicenter was pinpointed at five thousand meters under Shinjuku station—at least that's what was recorded in the files at the Japan Meteorological Agency. Along with a stamp that simply said: *Estimated*.

But even though Shinjuku was leveled, its adjoining metropolitan neighbors — Shibuya, Minato, Chiyoda — suffered no damage whatsoever. That night, the seismograph in the basement of the Imperial Palace barely budged.

This strange phenomenon came to be known in later years as the “Devil Quake.” It remained a puzzle to geologists and seismologists the world over. In time, the Great Shinjuku Earthquake was simply one more item added to an already long list of unexplained phenomena.

Part One

The ninth of September, the year 2030, 5:05 in the afternoon.

“Ahh, I don’t believe it!”

“Oh, *gross*, not again!”

The two high school students cried out in shrill dismay as they passed through the darkening school gate. The black wind had stealthily whirled up behind them, lifted up the skirts of their sailor uniforms, and even rudely slapped their asses.

“Stop!”

“Perv!”

They stamped their feet in outrage. But the whirlwind—carrying a black school satchel—sprinted down the dusk-drenched hill towards Mejiro station. In his wake, from around the two girls came the sound of cheers and clapping.

“Good one!”

“That’s my man!”

“Did’ja see? Yuko’s are white!”

The bystanders were guys from their school. The girls glared back at them, and then at the evaporating trail left by the departing whirlwind. The cheeks of the offended parties reddened a bit, along with a pained expression that could even be interpreted as unrequited affection.

Both girls whispered in their hearts: “Izayoi-kun is such an *idiot*. All he had to do was *ask* and I’d *show* him.”

Twenty minutes later, the whirlwind—now clothed in the form of a regulation Prussian-style high school uniform—was gobbling down a king-sized serving of

roasted pork ramen at a food stand behind Mejiro station. He was flanked by a pair of similarly-dressed teenagers. The whirlwind had long hair while they sported crew cuts.

The larger of the two was the captain of the Minakaze High School kendo team, Kenji Shiratori. His smaller, nimbler companion was Tomoyasu Kayama, captain of the Shorinji Kenpo club. Leaning against the counter next to Shiratori was a *shinai*—a bamboo fencing sword—in a tube-shaped duffel bag. The knuckles of Kayama’s fists were thick with calluses.

They’d arrived earlier and had been waiting for him. The other person there was a scowling old man who looked like a wizened philosopher. But he was only the proprietor of the food stand.

The falling night crept down the alley. The only illumination came from the radioluminescent streetlamps and the glow of the food stand lights. The moon was rising.

“So, what’s up?” asked the whirlwind as he slurped up the last of the broth and handed back the bowl. Due to a sudden change in the weather, his breath clouded brightly in the gloomy air.

Kyoya Izayoi was a student at Minakaze High School, a three-year comprehensive. Compared to the rough-hewn outlines of his two companions, he looked markedly more fit and trim, even handsome. Put a pair of glasses on him and a textbook under his arm and he could pass himself off as an honors student.

Though thanks to the laid-back and likable vibe that surrounded him, the aura he gave off was anything but cool and contained. That bit of skirt lifting notwithstanding, he was clearly something apart from the usual prodigy.

“Not a lot. But starting next month, things will get busy with the extramural club competitions. Naturally, you’re going to be in high demand. I want to make sure you put me and Kayama first on your list. There’s bound to be people pulling the usual dirty tricks, like what Akihabara Robot Technical High tried the last time.”

Shiratori had a soft voice that belied his large frame. Kyoya grinned and nodded. “Yeah, I never believed they’d sub in an android. Keeping up with the

robots is a real bear. They're getting just like real people. They got some of them trash talking and pumping their fists on the podium."

"Yeah. Don't matter how much you train, there's only so much you can do against the speed and power of a computer-controlled robot. Not to mention that they keep getting better at making silicon look like real skin. They can make 'em sweat and bleed and pass through metal detectors and show up on X-rays like humans."

Kayama picked up where Shiratori left off. "The martial arts are on the ropes, I'm telling you. That's why we need you there. Yeah, we're talking about high school sports, but Minakaze High's Kyoya Izayoi is the only one who can take them on and knock their screws loose. It's up to you to preserve the dignity of the martial arts against these mechanized cheaters! How about another pork ramen? It's on Shiratori today."

"Don't mind if I do! One more and supersize it!" Kyoya ordered cheerfully.

He thumped his two companions on the shoulders and flashed a leave-it-to-me smile, like he was a guy easy to game. Shiratori was about to protest, but Kayama caught his eye and grinned.

Despite this give and take, Kyoya wasn't a formal member of any of the sports teams. He stepped in when one of the regulars couldn't suit up or when they were facing off against a particularly tough opponent. An all-around pinch hitter. Since he didn't normally train with them, and only appeared when the chips were down, he wouldn't be worth much unless he could really deliver.

Which he'd done quite easily for three years now.

Minakaze High had been a second-ranked school until three years ago. At the preliminaries to the World Federal Martial Arts Junior Championships, they'd knocked out a veteran powerhouse. At the finals in Denmark, they'd turned the martial arts world on its head, racking up three victories in a row, largely thanks to him.

So whenever a big match was coming up, all the teams started scheming to book him in advance. This time around, Shiratori and Kayama were the first in line. Considering his affinity for kendo and Shorinji Kenpo, he probably would have shown up at their competitions no matter what.

But what was this business about knocking out robots?

As Shiratori and Kayama tussled back and forth about who exactly was footing the bill, Kyoya turned his attention to the steaming pork ramen. He picked up his chopsticks and was about to dig in when—

“*Hey—!*”

“*Shit—!*”

Shiratori’s grunts and Kayama’s shouts were overlaid with a harsh crunching sound. The air in the alley wavered.

Kyoya pushed the two away from him to the right and left. He flipped backwards just as the black shadows sneaking up behind them crashed into the food stand.

A vicious karate chop struck the edge of the counter and split it neatly in two. Broth and noodles scattered across the asphalt, along with pieces of the ramen bowls. The proprietor gaped and fell on his butt.

“What the hell?” roared Shiratori, jumping to his feet and whipping the *shinai* out of the duffel. In an instant, the sword flashed to the ready.

“Watch it, Izayoi. That guy’s after you.”

Kayama stood with his feet shoulders’ width apart, his right foot planted behind him, his balled fists a bit further out in front of his chest than the customary opening stance—the posture he took in a real fight. He scanned the ground in front of him and saw no other attackers.

Witnessing this act of superhuman power only ignited their own fighting spirits. In the world of high school martial arts, they were both the best in their class.

The two opponents facing them were giants with soft gray fedoras pulled over their eyes and wearing trench coats the same color. Over six feet and weighing close to two-fifty. Their expressionless, almost metallic, mask-like faces were weirdly off-putting, just as it was impossible to say whether they were Oriental or Occidental.

A gust of wind blew down the alleyway, laden with murderous intent.

“Oh, knock it off,” Kyoya drawled.

The way the big man swung his arm like an ax right at Kyoya, it was clear to Shiratori and Kayama that Kyoya was the target; and yet he stood there as calm as a summer day.

“This ain’t no joking matter!” Shiratori bellowed, his gentle demeanor evaporating. “No way we can just back down after a sucker punch like that! Move it!”

He spun around, ready to bust some balls, and gawked at the sight of Kyoya standing there, chopsticks and bowl in hand. Dodging danger by the skin of his teeth with inhuman quickness, he still managed to drain the last of the broth from the bowl without spilling a drop.

“Typical,” said Shiratori, admiration in his voice.

Kyoya polished off his second helping and set down the bowl. “These guys aren’t human. They’re cyborgs. I guess that means I’m the only one who can square off against them.”

The relaxed nature of this observation only raised the question of when he’d first realized it. He glanced down at the noodles and pork cutlets scattered on the ground and his attitude changed abruptly.

“I was thinking of going for thirds, but I guess that’s out of the question now. Dammit!”

Even his anger was short of true fury. His opponents didn’t move. Shiratori and Kayama yelled together, “Payback!”

The furious cry was followed by two bolts of lightning that shot at the two giants. Shiratori thrust at the throat of the one. Kayama delivered a roundhouse kick to the head of the other. No matter who they were fighting, no matter how unreasonable the contest, these two wouldn’t back down.

The cyborgs didn’t duck. The sensation of an aluminum bat hitting a brick wall reverberated through the boys’ wrists as the giants blocked the blows single-handedly. Faster than they could retreat, all the strength drained from their bodies. Shiratori and Kayama collapsed on the spot.

The thugs silently resumed their assault on Kyoya. They had tranquilizer guns in their palms—these were commando cyborgs.

Kyoya got serious. Commando cyborgs were advanced fighting units reserved for military use alone. Equipped with tranquilizer guns, dimensional radar, particle beam weapons, tactical nukes and electronic countermeasures, they could compete on an equal footing with mechanized units that included heavy tanks and fighter aircraft.

There was no way they could deploy weapons like that in an urban back alley and escape the fallout. But they also had regenerative metabolisms, bioengineered muscles, and silicon frames several orders of magnitude harder than steel, all powered by five-thousand horsepower nuclear motors that could smash their way into Fort Knox.

It'd be hard for them to call hand-to-hand combat with flesh and blood human beings anything but a joke.

“Maybe it's a little late to bring this up, but what the hell's your game here? Is the military so hard up they've resorted to shaking down high school students? You cruising for a bruising with the cops?”

The cyborgs rushed him together, throwing punches that could perforate armor plating.

Kyoya dove forward. The three figures converged into one. With a heavy clunk, the two cyborgs smashed together and rolled on the ground and didn't move.

The only one getting to his feet was Kyoya. He was holding Shiratori's *shinai* in his right hand. When he'd leapt forward, he'd twisted his body and planted the tip of the *shinai* against the chest of the one while delivering three straight-fisted jabs to the other.

Except that no matter how well-struck, there was no way he should have knocked out these cyborgs—that could be blasted with a bazooka at point-blank range and still keep on ticking.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!” Kyoya barked at the entrance to the alley. He was already breathing normally. “When the underlings screw up, the

guy in charge has got to take responsibility.”

Three silhouettes appeared, lit from behind by the lights of the station beyond. A barrel-chested middle-aged man and two burly younger men that must be his bodyguards. They drew closer, revealing the startled looks on their faces. They were ordinary—human—Japanese.

“Wouldn’t have believed it otherwise,” the man muttered, glancing at the comatose cyborgs. “Rai-sensei told me about you, but you have exceeded my expectations.” He had a professorial air about him, nothing that suggested an enemy. “Commando cyborgs are a cut above space and undersea workers. A lump of electronics. I didn’t think any human could switch them off with his bare hands. You didn’t *kill* them, I wonder?”

“Relax. Give them an hour and they’ll be back to normal. Though they might require an overhaul. More importantly, what about my friends and the ramen stand?” Though his voice was as carefree as ever, Kyoya’s eyes glittered like cut glass.

The man nodded. “Your friends should wake up in five minutes. The owner will be compensated. I apologize for the inconvenience. I’m sure the consolation money will cover any mental anguish. However, we will take their memories of the incident in exchange.”

He pointed at the entrance to the alley. A different set of men were standing guard, keeping any passersby from coming or looking in. This middle-aged man was obviously some sort of big shot. “A car is waiting.”

“One of the things my dad told me before he died was not to get into cars with strange old men.”

The man seemed to chuckle to himself. “This does have something to do with him. Oh, I’m sorry, we haven’t introduced ourselves.”

He produced a black leather ID wallet and flipped it open. The golden badge glinted in the moonlight. Stamped into the metal was the image of a phoenix holding up the globe with flaming wings. “Dai Yamashina. World Federation Government Information Bureau, Japan section. A pleasure to meet you.”

Kyoya bristled. “I don’t care if you’re boss of the whole damned organization,

I'm not going anywhere without a few answers first.”

Section Chief Yamashina nodded. “The boss of the whole damned organization was, in fact, attacked by creatures or persons unknown and is in critical condition. We have three days to search out the sorcerer and undo the damage. Specifically, with your *nenpo*.”

That night in Azabu, in a room at the ultra-modern headquarters of the Japan section of the World Federation Government Information Bureau, Section Chief Yamashina filled in Kyoya on the finer details of the situation.

Since his father died, his aunt and uncle had been taking care of him. He was allowed to phone them and say that school club activities would be keeping him late. He was a favorite nephew and they happily agreed.

The situation concerned the attempted assassination of Kozumi Rama, president of the World Federation.

Kozumi Rama—every child above the age of three knew that name. Born a world apart from the earth, the man whom the great sage Agni Rai had declared at his birth was a “holy man.” The man who, until his twentieth birthday, had never set foot on earth. And yet communicating with him telepathically across a quarter million miles of empty space, Master Rai conferred upon him a saint’s education.

At the age of twenty, the savant was unanimously elected the representative of the lunar colony’s governing body. At the young age of thirty-five, he achieved the presidency of the World Federation. After that, in the span of six months, he’d overseen the signing of a peace treaty between those eternal enemies, the Arab League and the state of Israel, and concluded a comprehensive atomic, biological, and chemical weapons ban between the greater NATO and ASEAN alliances. These achievements were still fresh in everybody’s mind.

In particular, with nuclear war seeming inevitable, he summoned the leaders of the two parties to the New York Federation section and in a meeting lasting only a few minutes brought into existence the only possible conclusion. The summit later came to be known as the “Five Minute Miracle.”

Since 2010, the entire world had been gripped in a dark curse. In the face of economic recession, growing regional conflicts and rising crime rates, President

Rama was as resolute in his actions as he was charitable in his words. And changed the world as a result.

Five years after his inauguration, people began to sense that the trails he was blazing were indeed leading to a brighter future.

And then several days before, on September eight at one o'clock in the afternoon, New York time, a literal hand of evil struck him down. The time difference meant it was recorded in Japan on the ninth at three in the morning.

The incident took place in the presidential offices on the fifth floor of the Federation government office building. Monitors recorded the particulars of what went on there. Section Chief Yamashina played it back.

The president was taking a break from pressing business, while his multi-purpose guard robot and secretary read through the cables and letters that had collected unread for several days.

All correspondence was electronically scanned first. As busy as he was, the president couldn't read every message sent to him from around the world. It was simply a matter of expediency to trust such matters to the secretary's electronic brain.

There was one other reason for this preliminary check. Ordinary letters and stationery, even the print itself, could be fashioned into explosives, poisonous gas and other assassination tools. The criminal enterprises behind international drug smuggling syndicates and the merchants of death supplying the arms trade were the president's committed enemies.

The president set aside the longer missives and asked to start with the cables. It happened during the fourth one.

The android's memory bank contained the files and settings for two thousand different languages. He stated that the letter was in ancient Sanskrit, the four-thousand-year-old classical language that had originated in India. It had been relayed via the "Woodpecker" communications satellite, but the originator was unknown.

It later came to light that the satellite's router records—that archived the originating sources of all relayed messages—were blank for this particular one.

The secretary noted that from the arrangement of the characters, the message appeared to be a kind of religious ritual. It could be read phonetically, but translation was impossible.

The president indicated that he should read it.

The android secretary began to read the cable—hardly possible to reproduce with human vocal cords—and that was when *it* appeared.

A grotesque shadow separated itself from the president's shadow. It was no more substantial than a shadow, had no head or limbs, but crawling and wriggling along the floor, was clearly a living thing. About six feet long, the end of the oval section that must have been its abdomen narrowed like a reptile's tail.

Though it consisted of nothing more than that, the ghostly, unearthly aura rising from its entire length dropped the temperature in the room precipitously.

The android secretary detected danger at once, rang the alarm in the adjoining guard room, and hit the creature with an electromagnetic baton. Undaunted, it rose up from the floor. Its body wavering back and forth, it approached the president.

With every rippling movement, its body drew out thinner and thinner, until it became a single line that appeared and disappeared, a two-dimensional being. Mucus-like material dripped from the edges—or so it seemed, as these too were shavings off a shadow.

The miasma it ejected filled the room with a noxious odor. The discharge of a laser gun flashed from the android secretary's shoulder. The bright light was sucked into the pitch-black body. The guards came running, but the beams from their large-caliber particle guns couldn't penetrate the impossibly thin film of material.

The secretary leapt into the fray. The shadow spun and wrapped around the hardened metal body with blazing speed. Before the president or the other guards could raise a cry, with a dull roar the android's frame shattered into pieces and crumbled to the floor like a load of scrap iron.

The shadow streaked at the president. An electromagnetic barrier flashed

around his desk. The shadow cut through it with ease and attached itself to his waist. A wiry appendage grew from its tail, reached out and seized the president's throat.

One of the guards tried to tear it away, but could find no purchase.

The president's face grew dark and purple. Fighting for his life, he grabbed a paper knife—more like a short dagger—from the desk and plunged it into the shadow's appendage.

The thin “arm” severed in the vicinity of the “wrist.” The shadow reared back, scattering dark sheets of its “blood” or “plasma.” It disappeared and reappeared two, three more times, then vanished.

Clutching his throat, the president lifted the barrier. The guards rushed in, amazed. From the severed arm, the silhouette of a wrist remained fixed to the president, the writhing snake-like fingers still clamped to his neck.

The president was taken at once to a special ward in the hospital attached to the Federation building. A corps of doctors set to work on him. They could do nothing. For lack of a better word, the “wound”—the shadow of the wrist was all that remained of the hand buried a micro-millimeter into the skin—proved impervious to X-rays, CT scans, ultrasound, and other diagnostic measures.

And yet, as the world's best physicians and their instruments looked on, the president continued to weaken. His breathing grew labored. An hour after the incident, just as it seemed that all was lost, the president's teacher, Master Agni Rai, suddenly appeared in the hospital room.

This white-haired, turbaned old man—estimated to be a good one hundred and thirty years old—had instructed the president for twenty years from sacred ground in India. He was a yogi and esper of incomparable power. Since the president moved to Earth, Master Rai was often seen in the president's company, doubling as a bodyguard.

Nowadays, his research into psychic powers and telekinesis continued. Not only the aforementioned criminal gangs, but others rode the waves of discord in the world, including religious cults springing up from the always fashionable worship of the devil. They plotted the assassination of the president, and had no qualms about using voodoo and paranormal techniques like remote

manipulation.

Unfortunately, the night before the incident, Master Rai had teleported to India to take part in an annual interstellar seance held on the peak of Amne Machin in Tibet. He had appeared in the hospital room after his supernatural senses detected a change in the president's condition.

Seeing the president on the verge of suffocating, the mark of the hand on his throat, Master Rai knew at once this was the work of black magic. While performing an incantation to stay the accursed wizardry at work, he said, "Before departing for India, I erected a psychic wall around him that should have repelled the strongest curse or spiritual attack. Why was this apparition able to break through?"

At length, the gray-faced vice-president described what had happened. After viewing a video record of the incident, the old sage nodded. With a severe expression, he stated that a Demon Realm monster called a *Nidom* had attacked the president.

"When the android secretary began reading the ancient script, the conjuration shattered my shields and called forth the *Nidom*. The sender went to the trouble of relaying the message through a communications satellite as a diplomatic cable, knowing that its effectiveness depended on it being read to the recipient. It is a good thing that I left a holy dagger for his self-defense. I will understand better once we determine why the president had his secretary read the cable in the first place. How it was able to reach him precisely on the day I would not be there? I cannot believe the timing was coincidental. Whoever called forth that monster must have read my movements."

After a moment of quiet contemplation, the Master met with the vice-president and the Federation High Council in another room and explained the situation to them in terms that left them all pale.

"Unfathomable dangers are assaulting the planet as we speak. Should the president die, the world—well on its way toward its most promising future since recorded history began—will slip back into another dark age ruled by war, doubt and suspicion. If things are left to fester in their current state, the curse will surely kill the president. Even with all the power at my command, I cannot

hold it back for long. If the warlock who commands this black magic, or the hex itself, is not destroyed in three days—by one o'clock in the afternoon on September twelfth—the president will lose his life.”

The council members erupted in consternation, and all the more so those who, like the president, knew the extent of the old man's considerable and inexplicable powers. They couldn't help but recognize the gravity of a world ruled by evil sorcery should the president die.

As the room descended into panic, the Master said in a kind but stern voice, “The World Federation and the intelligence apparatuses of all the affiliated Federation states should exert every effort to locate the Egyptian shaman Rebi Ra. And if they do ascertain his location, make no attempt to detain him. He employs demons as his guards that no conventional weapons can harm. I would go, but unless I attend to the seals and the incantations strengthening them, I fear the president will succumb. I shall say this only once again—my powers will last only to the twelfth at one o'clock. Best you hurry.”

Having seen the video record of the assault, the council members were uniformly persuaded by the Master's remarks. They jumped to their feet and rushed out of the room. The vice-president remained behind when the Master called to him.

“There is somebody else I wish you to find,” he whispered. “For the time being, I wish to keep this from the president's political opponents. But there is one other person who possesses the skills I have taught him.”

“And that's me?” said Kyoya. He was sitting on the sofa slurping the last of a glass of orange juice through a straw.

Section Chief Yamashina's explanation and the video of the attack on the president had just ended, but he asked the question as if he and they were entirely unrelated.

“To be precise, your father Genichiro. Three decades ago, he was taught the mysteries of yoga at the feet of Master Rai.”

“Huh. News to me. Not bad for a hard old nut like him. Unfortunately, he died of pneumonia four years ago.”

The section chief nodded. “That is why we are turning to you. According to our investigation, a month after you were born, your father took you to Mt. Daisetsu on the island of Hokkaido. It seems he and your mother had divorced. He must have been fully committed to the course he was taking. Mt. Daisetsu is one of Japan’s thirteen holiest sites. A place to sharpen the will and the mind. There your father trained you in the martial art of *nenpo*. I can hardly begin to imagine such skills—practiced from the time you were a child—but they must be terrific.”

The section chief retrieved a fax from the machine on his desk.

“A report from the maintenance division. The cyborgs have regained consciousness, but their internal circuitry was altered such that they had to be sent out for repairs. No damage at all to the external structure, and no apparent damage to the nervous system. The cause is uncertain. The maintenance division techs are beside themselves. The Master asked that your skills be tested, but the results proved more amazing than expected.”

A cryptic smile rose to Kyoya’s lips. “Whatever. Why did you drag me all the way down here?”

Section Chief Yamashina sat down on the couch in front of Kyoya. He looked him in the eye and said in a heavy voice, “We want you to capture the sorcerer and bring him here. We pinned down his location. The rest is up to you. On the twelfth at one o’clock in the afternoon—the thirteenth at three in the morning, Japan time—that gives us three more days. Are you willing to deploy your *nenpo* techniques for the good of the world?”

“Give me a break.” Kyoya looked away. “I’m a high school senior, for crying out loud. I was minding my own business, enjoying some ramen, and those two Neanderthals pick a fight with me. I won, so that means I’ve got to save the world? What, I’m just supposed to say, hey, sure thing? We’ve got cops and armies for that sort of stuff. I can’t believe grown men have been running around after a juvenile delinquent like me. Idiots.”

The section chief sighed. “I’m afraid the reality is rather embarrassing. The fact is, as soon as we isolated the target, the main office counseled the Master to deploy esper agents. I shouldn’t have to tell you he vetoed the idea. He

illustrated why in a particularly vivid manner. He had three battle espers and military cyborgs sent to the president's hospital room. In front of the Federation High Council, he told them to attack him in any way they could. The Federal military commander gave the okay."

"So, what happened?" asked Kyoya, intrigued.

"Nothing. The espers and their telekinesis, the cyborgs and their particle guns—none of their weapons made a dent. The Master, though, with no more than a flick of a finger, rendered them all unconscious, knocked them over like tenpins. Then he declared that their enemy possessed even more power than that. The powers of the Demon Realm are not beholden to the physical laws of this world. Physical attacks are pointless."

"I see. So it comes down to *nenpo*."

"I don't really know how, but with sufficient training, human thought can elevate ordinary physical energy to spiritual power and perform what are commonly called miracles. *Nenpo* transforms that ability into a martial art that can destroy sorcery and the demons it summons. I'm only repeating what the Master said. You will be compensated in any case. But the clock is ticking even as we sit here. So the question still stands—will you help us?"

He bowed his head. Kyoya flashed a thin smile. This wasn't an act. His was a request from the heart, a matter of the utmost urgency.

"No thanks," said Kyoya. "Any way I look at this, it ain't a sword I want to pull out of the stone. It's up to more responsible people than me to save the world. Besides, there's no guarantee I've got what it takes to grab this big bad sorcerer. Can somebody here resurrect me if he turns the tables?"

Yamashina didn't answer.

"Sorry. It's not like I'm wanting to screw with you on purpose, but I gotta speak my mind. I hope you don't think any worse of me for it. First of all, I'm generally up to no good, or I'm simply not trying. I've given this *nenpo* business short shrift. I'd rather party hardy and hit on girls, not spend all day at the dojo. You know the advice my dad left to me in his will? *Live free*. What the hell, you know? I wasn't exactly the apple of his eye."

“I do not happen to think so,” said a low, calm voice behind him.

“Shit!”

Kyoya jumped even more than Section Chief Yamashina. Up to that very moment, he hadn’t detected any other presence in the room. The owner of the voice had appeared in the room in an instant.

He whirled around. A small old man clothed in white stood there. He was wearing a turban that looked like a squashed vase. Only his face, framed by the high collar of his jacket, was dark—as if deeply tanned by the sun—and wrinkled. His white beard reached his chest, further suggesting an advanced age.

Even so, his eyes were as clear as a baby’s, and his frame radiated a vigor that pushed Kyoya back like a gust of wind.

“Master Rai!” Yamashina jumped up from the couch and ran over to him. “When did you arrive? I would have arranged a welcome if you’d only let me know. Please, this way.”

The otherwise straight-laced section chief smothered the small man—who stood no higher than his chest—with unctuous courtesies, enough to make Kyoya want to gag.

“Enough already! Leave the geezer alone. Don’t matter if he’s standing or sitting. There’s no way he’d leave the president alone for this long anyway.”

Kyoya’s right hand twitched. The straw flew through the air, pierced the Master’s face, and thudded into the wall.

“A doppelganger. The real thing is in New York as we speak.”

A doppelganger was an alter ego that could surmount time and space, recreating a copy of the self anywhere and any time of a person’s choosing. Only those deeply immersed in the secret mysteries of yoga could ever hope to achieve such a feat.

The old man’s smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. “You are a discerning young man. What I would expect from the son of Genichiro Izayoi. It seems all your practice has amounted to something, after all.”

“Yeah, right. We just went through all this—”

“I know.” The Master sat down on the facing couch, shushing Kyoya with a nod. “You are still an inexperienced practitioner of *nenpo*. But that is not all I know. I know your character and qualities. With Kyoya Izayoi, the son has outdone the parent, so much so that I would like to take you on as a pupil. Genichiro understood that as well, and so trained you from the time you were in diapers.”

Kyoya grimaced. “You know what? Sometimes flattery won’t get you anywhere. I’ve got no opinion about how great and wonderful my dad supposedly was. Anyway, I really don’t think this is one of those like-father, like-son things.” He got up from the sofa and waved his hand. “I’m leaving, if you don’t mind. Thanks for the drinks.”

“Wait.”

“Fine.”

With one word from the Master, Kyoya returned to the sofa. He didn’t feel compelled in the least. More like being gently turned at the shoulders.

“Genichiro apparently didn’t explain his reasons for developing his *nenpo* techniques.”

“Not in the slightest.” Kyoya shook his head.

The memories of the harsh training on Mt. Daisetsu came alive in his thoughts. The purification rituals, concentrating the mind under a pounding waterfall; kneeling under a freezing night sky in Zen meditation in order to become one with the spiritual energy of the universe; training with his fists and the sword until his body throbbed and he coughed up blood.

Why his father went to such lengths—why he drove him so hard—as far back as he could remember, his father refused to respond to any questions or doubts. One of the reasons Kyoya eventually rebelled.

“Your father and the sorcerer Rebi Ra, the mastermind behind this latest incident, were both my disciples. They both trained under me.”

The Master’s quiet voice yanked Kyoya back to reality, and back to the reality of what he’d just said. “What the hell!”

“What did you just say?” This was obviously news to Section Chief Yamashina as well.

“Thirty-seven years ago, two young men came to Tibet, to my hermitage in the mountains, to pursue their studies of yoga’s mysterious powers. They were both twenty-five at the time. Despite their quite different nationalities—Japanese and Egyptian—they both possessed the burning desire and qualities necessary to conquer the heights of spiritual power. With this in mind, I took them on as disciples. As expected, they progressed at an amazing rate. What had taken me a decade in my younger years they mastered in three. At that pace, they would surely achieve that desired oneness with the cosmic mind, at the extreme boundaries of the yoga art. But two years after that, the two left the mountain.”

A touch of bitterness colored the Master’s voice. Beneath the backdrop of this incident was a buried and dark history. Kyoya and Yamashina leaned forward and listened with rapt attention.

“Because Rebi Ra had tasted the raptures of the Demon Realm. An undiscovered country at the borders of this one, where the wicked lie in wait to corrupt the virtuous and add them to their growing number, promising to turn loathing and hatred to joy, and fashion reason out of fear and hopelessness. How many capable acolytes have I seen fall into their poisonous grasp? They should have shrugged them off and steeled their wills to reach higher states of self-enlightenment—treat these temptations as a phase of their training to be risen above, just as Buddha was tempted beneath the banyan tree and Christ was tested by the devil in the wilderness.”

The Master sadly shook his head. “But Ra succumbed. While tempering his body, his spirit chose the pleasures of the Demon Realm over the joys of the spirit. One day he abruptly departed. As a disciple of the Demon Realm, he could not enjoy even a single day of peace or calm, and he left to make use of the skills he had acquired thus far. I should not have let him return to the ordinary world. At the time, I could not imagine he had fallen as far as it turns out he had. For a while, I heard rumors of a warlock who possessed powers unheard of in times past or present, and regretted my decision. And then this incident. I take the blame for what has happened. Defeating Ra is my responsibility. But I cannot move. So it falls to the one person who equals him

in strength and ability, the son to whom Genichiro taught everything he knew.”

That son broke the air of tension in the room with rolled eyes and a shrug. His father’s past meant nothing to him. And even if it did and he agreed, it was hard to say what he could accomplish with that kind of attitude. Yamashina breathed a dejected sigh.

“I get it about the bad guy. But why did my father leave?”

A faraway look came to the Master’s eyes. “Two days after Ra left the mountain, Genichiro followed him. It seemed he had an idea about what Ra was up to, and he was the only one who could stop him. Perhaps he even knew that a day like today was coming, and that his son would be the one facing off against him. Otherwise, he would have trained himself and engaged the battle. Genichiro possessed powers of precognition that neither Ra nor I possessed. During our telepathic interactions, he foresaw the future with a certainty I could not match. Even Ra was impressed on more than one occasion.”

“I don’t want to hear it!” Kyoya said, his voice rising to a shout. “You think you’re gonna pull the wool over my eyes spinning yarns like that? You think I’m going to do a one-eighty on my life based on a bunch of conjecture? So tell me why my dad didn’t say squat about why he was putting me through all that training? If he’d been straight up with me, you know, I might have actually gone along for the ride. And if he did have some sort of reason, then what’s with this *live free* crap?”

Kyoya folded his arms across his chest and turned away with a huff. “This sucks. None of this was my idea, remember. If I say I ain’t going, then I ain’t going! Hey, she’s cute!”

Startled by the sudden commotion, the section chief cast a surprised glance at the door behind him. The door leading to the adjacent room closed, and standing next to it was a young woman.

She possessed a translucent kind of beauty. Her glimmering black hair reached her waist, accentuating the striking clarity of her skin. Her light-blue two-piece dress was plainly tailor-made, and simply by being worn by her seemed to glow of its own accord. She bowed silently and with elegant steps crossed the room and sat down next to the Master.

“This is the president’s daughter, Sayaka-san. I will formally introduce you later.” The Master asked in an affectionate voice, “Have you heard our conversation thus far?”

The girl—Sayaka Rama—nodded. She was sixteen, a freshman at a high school in New York. Knowing that there was someone in Japan who could help, she’d come directly here, with no idea whether he would listen to her or not. The Master had told her everything in New York. The section chief had left her in the guest suite, not wanting to burden her should his negotiations with Kyoya fail. Out of concern for her father’s welfare, Sayaka had snuck into the adjoining room and listened through the door.

“You are our only hope,” Sayaka said earnestly.

Kyoya just stared back at her. There was none of the lecher in this gaze, such was the young woman’s refined character. Not counting the ones at his own school, this martial arts maven would need the fingers of both hands to count the girlfriends he was stringing along. But he’d never reacted like this before, no matter how beautiful the woman in his sights.

“Please save my father. Right now he is fighting for his life in a hospital bed far away. He is all I have right now.”

Sayaka’s mother had died shortly after her birth. That reason alone explained her deep and abiding love for him. Kyoya felt a gentle sensation in his chest. Some old man wasn’t asking for his help on behalf of world peace and the like—but a daughter on behalf of her beloved father.

He took note of his softening heart and deliberately put on a bad attitude. “Sure. On one condition. Lend an ear.”

She did as requested. Sayaka’s face suddenly flushed bright red. “Ah!” said the section chief. But faster than he could interfere, the sound of a lively slap echoed around the room.

“Ouch!” Kyoya pressed his hand against his cheek with an exaggerated frown.

Sayaka examined her own palm with an equally surprised expression. “I—I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done such a thing.”

“Aw, forget it. My face is just as happy getting slapped by a babe.” Kyoya shot

her a wink. No harm, no foul. He could tell she wasn't sorry just because she'd hauled off and smacked the man who could save her father. It was an honest response. She wasn't trying to play him.



“So will you help me?”

“Naw, this is one thing and that is another.”

“So you are angry then,” she said, the forlorn look on her face that of a young woman lost in the depths of despair.

Kyoya hastily added, “No, um, to cut to the chase here—”

“You are our only hope,” said the Master, repeating the same words as Sayaka, albeit in more severe tones. “For Sayaka-san’s father, for the planet. This is not something I could say to any other person. The way I see things developing, Ra’s goal is more than causing a brief spree of chaos. He seeks ruin on a much grander and deeper scale. Put bluntly, to destroy the soul of the world.”

The section chief furrowed his brow. “What the hell does that mean?”

“The demon lodged in the president’s throat—the hand print of the *Nidom* assassin summoned forth from the Demon Realm—using chiromancy techniques, I traced back Ra’s intentions and designs. In one way or another, it seems he is attempting to call forth from the depths of creation an evil of unmatched dimensions.”

Kyoya’s eyes glittered. Yamashina stammered, “Y-you mean, Satan?”

“I do not know if he will go that far, but should this being appear but once, the world would be steeped in fear and despair. The darkness of the damned would reign instead. Men would be bound together only by hate and murder in a twilight struggle for life. Love and hope and joy lost, civilization as we know it would rot away. This would become another Demon Realm.”

For a long moment, silence filled the room. Then Kyoya said nonchalantly, “I see. He’s supposed to be a ritual sa—”

He cut off the rest of the sentence. In a faint voice, Sayaka finished it for him. “A ritual sacrifice.”

The Master looked at her, compassion showing in his eyes. “Yes. Having paid the necessary tribute in the form of a man of such high virtue, *it* will appear when the president draws his last breath. Ra’s previous efforts failed because the offering was lacking.”

“You telling me the bastard has tried this before?”

“Yes. And we are now at the scene of the crime.”

“Where? When?”

The Master said softly, “Early in the twenty-first century. In Japan.”

Kyoya searched his memories. Then bolted from the sofa. “Son of a bitch! *That’s* where you were gonna send me? You’re nothing but a pair of double-dealing con men!”

“Nobody is forcing you to do anything. What is your answer?”

“Hmph.” Kyoya again huffed and turned away. “This stinks to high heaven. But—let me get this straight—in that case, the earthquake was because of *it* showing up, but this Ra chap couldn’t seal the deal?”

The Master nodded. “As Ra summoned *it* from deep within the earth, their streams of demonic energy failed to converge, and were redirected instead into the earth’s crust and caused the damage we still see today, all in complete contradiction to the known laws of science.”

Kyoya found himself at a loss for words. Section Chief Yamashina and Sayaka were also rendered speechless, their faces wan. *That earthquake?*

“I must return shortly,” said the Master’s doppelganger. “I cannot easily perform the incantations for the president and converse with you at the same time. If nothing else, please remember this: Kyoya Izayoi, the peace of the world rests upon your shoulders. The future—and soul—of the world. Won’t you yield and accept this duty?”

The Master’s form faded. Before disappearing entirely, his low but demanding voice said, “A true hero cannot overlook the suffering of others. My disciple was a true hero. I believe the same of his son.”

Caught in the steady gaze of the young woman and the middle-aged man, Kyoya Izayoi averted his eyes.

Part Two

The darkness was omnipresent and oppressive, like an expanding slick of heavy black oil. In its very center, the smothering silence suddenly broke.

“Kaki, you there?” asked an inorganic voice, utterly devoid of human emotion.

A point of light glowed in the empty space. No brighter than a cigarette lighter, it steadily expanded in height and width, sprouted arms and legs, until it took on human dimensions. And yet did not disturb the density of the darkness in the slightest. A fire that shared its light with nothing—the fire of the Demon Realm.

“You’re here,” said the same voice. “Doki and Suiki should be arriving soon.” He meant the demons of earth and water. “Don’t let your powers slacken. The enemy draws near.”

The fire wavered. The portion forming its face bent into a sneer. A sprite that manipulated the fires of this world—that was Kaki.

A burning right hand stretched out toward the speaker, collided with something and deflected, the column of flame bursting apart like an overripe tomato, the streamers curling around and headed at the target.

“Stop it!” the voice barked.

The lines of fire reversed course and merged into one and became an arm again. At the same time, the lights came on. The speaker had switched on a miniature nuclear lamp. The strange, concrete-enclosed space emerged in the blue-white radioactive glow. An old desk and chair in the center; a laboratory bench lined with rows of beakers and test tubes; bookshelves filled with worn leather-bound books of spells and magic.

And far on the other side, an incongruous collection of electrical machinery and what appeared to be automated surgical equipment. Considering its size and

the height of the vaulted ceiling, what looked at first like an ordinary room could be more appropriately described as a large underground plaza.

This was one room in the secret headquarters of the sorcerer Rebi Ra and his three Demon Realm bodyguards. The evil odors bubbling out of the noxious fluids in the test tubes and beakers, mingled with the ghostly aura emitted by the inhabitants of the room, together with the cool air—a combination that no normal human could stand for more than a minute.

This was a small Demon Realm within the human world.

“I know the strengths of your powers,” scolded the Sorcerer. He was seated at the desk, wearing a black hood and mantle. Thirty-seven years before, when he was twenty-five, he had been Master Rai’s pupil. That made him sixty-two. The thin face inside the shroud looked ten years older, except that his eyes possessed a haunting glow, and the aura cast off by his body lent him an oily demeanor.

He held up his palm for Kaki to see. Gray smoke rose from the scorched flesh, where he’d blocked Kaki’s arm of flame. Otherwise, the fire would have engulfed his body and burned him down to the marrow of his bones. Despite calling them forth as their master, these creatures of the Demon Realm must be treated with all due discretion, though there wasn’t the slightest indication of pain on the sorcerer’s face.

“But the enemy we face next is far stronger. My prophetic dreams are stained black and blue. Hopefully not with your blood.”

“And the name of this enemy?” another presence asked.

“Is that Suiki?”

“Doki is here also.”

The voice came from the silver goblet sitting near the sorcerer’s hand, that still held a few drops of wine.

“Show yourself.”

“Yes.”

The upper half of a human body rose out of the goblet. It wore a hood and medieval priestly garb the same color as the sorcerer’s. Its entire body—at least

the upper half that appeared out of the goblet—dripped with water. This sprite had water at its command. Shadowed by the hood, its features were impossible to make out, except for the lively red gleam of its eyes. A mist filled the room as the auras of Kaki and Suiki collided.

“Whoa!”

Even knowing this was a regular occurrence, Suiki’s unexpected appearance caused the Sorcerer to push back his chair, and then look down at his feet. Something resembling a man’s head and shoulders pushed out of the tiled floor. *Resembled* because its face lacked eyes or a nose, the fingers seemed to adhere to its hands more out of obligation than biology, and its skin was the reddish-brown color and grain of the soil far below.

Whether concrete or stone, nothing that touched the ground could hold him back, for this was Doki, the devilish earth sprite.

The enemies of the earth were gathered here amidst the haze and devilish miasma.

“And the name?” asked Doki.

“I do not know the name or the appearance. But I can make an educated guess. After I caught the vision of the Demon Realm and cast aside my sacred training, I heard that the man I had studied with also descended the mountain and perfected a martial art called *nenpo*. Based on his disposition, I would say that he did so in order to challenge me. He did not pursue me at the time, so I set such concerns aside. His name is Genichiro Izayoi.”

The murderous discord of the three sprites whirled around the room.

“So what became of him?”

“I do not know. Thirty years have passed. He would be an old man by now. Perhaps a son or disciple? Either way, the foe I see in my dreams has frightening skills at his command. Your own powers may not be enough to defeat him.”

With a dull roar, Kaki’s body expanded to twice its size, an expression of his rage. The heat shook the air in the room. A fierce burst of steam rose from Suiki’s upper half. Doki alone appeared to laugh silently.

Kaki said, “Leave him to me. I don’t care how strong he thinks he is, if he lives according to the laws of the mortal world, he can die according to them as well. He will not lay a finger on us. Give me a good ten seconds and watch me take him apart piece by piece, molecule by molecule, atom by atom.”

The Sorcerer gave Kaki’s overweening confidence an equally self-satisfied nod. He had a great amount of trust in the strength of his supernatural bodyguards.

“I’m counting on you. The day is approaching when you will meet face to face. Reveal your true powers slowly when the time comes. What about tonight’s rite? Is the offering ready? A minimum of two virgins is necessary.”

“Yes,” said Suiki. “One was located last month and a letter sent. All is going according to plan. The other is being sought out as we speak. She will surely be delivered to the altar of blood at the appointed time.”

“Then you had better be on your way.”

Taking that as their cue, the demons disappeared. For a little while longer, the nuclear lamp illuminated the sorcerer’s smiling face in the electric glow. But then that too died away, inviting the return of the surrounding black.

It was around eleven when Kyoya got home. His aunt and uncle took seriously the motto *early to bed, early to rise* and were already asleep. A couple of home delivery food packs were waiting in the kitchen. Not uncommon in this neighborhood. The night life of the young had grown later and later over the years. The PTA blamed, for one, Tokyo’s twenty-four-hour automated bus service.

A food pack could preserve and keep its contents heated for up to three days. After opening and consuming them, Kyoya went upstairs to his room. From a locker recessed into the wall, he took out a wooden sword in a cloth sheath.

It was called Asura, after the Hindu archangel, and was the only remaining memento of his father. When he was a boy, his father had placed the sword in his hands—carved from the branch of an evergreen oak on Mount Grdhrakuta—and trained him in the art of *nenpo*.

He removed the sheath, stood in the middle of the room, and settled into an *en*

garde position, the blade of the sword centered and the tip rising to the height of an opponent's eyes. His palms melded to the hilt. A warmth and a power flowed through the connection, the mental energy instilled in Asura by his father, Genichiro. Even to a prodigy like Kyoya, his father's skills as a fencer were truly awesome.

In his twilight years, those extraordinary talents seemed to diminish, such that he lost two out of three matches to Kyoya. But Kyoya was not convinced that he had gotten that much better, or his father that much worse. Rather, wielding the sword with all his heart and might had smithed his spirit into the sword. His father's will as well resided in Asura.

Not surprising, considering the opponent. However reluctant, this untested son would have to fall back on his father's strength.

Kyoya was ready to leave. He couldn't explain to himself how things had gotten to this point. This had nothing to do with the efforts of Master Rai and Section Chief Yamashina to persuade him. In fact, after Master Rai disappeared, Yamashina and Sayaka left the room without saying another word.

To start with, he had plans. His path after graduation was already mapped out. He'd applied for and been awarded an athletic scholarship to the Earth Federation base on Phobos. He had a hard time believing a sorcerer's curses could run after him all the way to Mars.

Then why?

Although he'd posed the question to the Master, Kyoya actually did understand where his father was coming from. The purpose of his training was as the Master explained. The reasons he'd kept mum about it were also becoming clear.

He didn't want me carrying that burden all through my childhood.

Suppose that he knew that his son was predestined from the start—Kyoya knew perfectly well that his father wasn't the type to keep something like that buttoned up because he figured his son would find out about it sooner or later.

He certainly understood Kyoya's character—spill the beans just once, and no matter how contrary he might be, in the end he would always return to the scene

of the battle. His father couldn't bear his son living a life so utterly predetermined from the start.

Then why didn't he slacken in his training until the day he collapsed? He must have felt the fever coming on as he practiced kenpo in the bitter cold of the mountains. A few hours after Kyoya found him, he died with the single word "Shinjuku" on his lips.

Because he believed in me. Not because it was something that he was *fated* to do, but because it was something he would choose of his own free will.

Though that wasn't what now propelled him on his way. Her face rose up in his thoughts. Her long black hair—that translucent young lady—fighting back the tears. She must be sixteen or so.

Am I doing it for her?

He didn't know the answer. Among all the reasons, it was probably the one closest to the truth. Well, good enough for him. Wracking his brains over it wouldn't do him any good.

Every cell of his body was brimming with energy—his and his father's souls fusing together in Asura, giving birth to psychic energies of unimaginable power. He had unfailingly taken a hundred practice swings morning and night in order to savor that sensation, as if his body was turning into a fusion reactor.

The question was how well he could control it.

Kyoya took another object from the back of the locker. A carved wooden doll a foot tall, of an African medicine man with a bow in his hand. The dark paint had worn away in places, exposing the grain beneath. It was clearly an antique, though it didn't look particularly valuable. A rather odd touch was that the arrow notched in the bow was sticking into the man's chest.

Kyoya set the doll in the middle of the floor and removed the arrow. He placed it in the empty hand and quickly backed away and once again assumed an *en garde* pose.

Several seconds passed.

The doll grinned. Simultaneously, the room transformed. Water erupted

violently out of the computer display unit, met by a spray of fire from the wall opposite, resulting in an ear-splitting explosion that shook the air. The entire room shuddered. The rollaway desk and the bed danced through the air, along with the digital notepad and electromagnetic pen and trinkets and gifts from his girlfriends.

A poltergeist at work!

Amidst the ceaseless roar and madly flying objects, Kyoya stood there motionless, eyes half closed. The doll opened its red mouth and laughed a piercing loud laugh.

This was an African voodoo doll. When a witch doctor was asked to cast a spell on a bitter rival, he would secret the doll somewhere in his house. It would draw in the wandering spirits and trigger supernatural events. The poltergeist was one of them. Even after the phenomenon ended, the unleashed miasmas and noxious odors would render the place unlivable.

Actions of the evil spirits could only be countered by being sealed with stronger magic, or by destroying the poltergeist itself. Either way, an arduous task. If a medium were in the room now, it would witness a horde of elated apparitions whirling about.

The doll notched the arrow into the bow string. Kyoya raised Asura over his head. As if by previous arrangement, the mad dancers retreated to the corners of the room. In the middle of the bed covers, a huge mouth opened up and bared its fangs.

The arrow shot across the room, growing in midair to a yard in length, straight at Kyoya's heart. The thing in the bed sprang at him as well.

"Yaa—!"

With a shattering cry that could tear the walls in two, Kyoya brought Asura down in a sweeping arc. The air trembled. A flash of silver light shot at the doll's chest.

A moment later he stood alone in the room, as calm and quiet as the autumn night.

Everything was back to normal, the same as before the doll smiled. The only

difference was that the doll had toppled over. The arrow protruded from its chest. What was odd about it was a slight twist about halfway down the shaft, as if it had ricocheted off something.

Kyoya wordlessly picked up the doll and put it back in the locker. Just to make sure, he opened the door and peeked into the hallway. There was no sign this late-night racket had disturbed his aunt and uncle. Not a single sound had leaked out of his room.

“Good enough,” he murmured to himself. He propped Asura against the bed and packed his bag.

He’d summoned the poltergeist to test his might, mind and intention, his *nen*. The doll had long been a favorite sparring partner in that regard.

When his and his father’s *nen* fused together, frightening results could spring from its misuse. A light jab against a human opponent could crush his skull. A tap with the pinky could shatter the heart. Kyoya had once knocked a truck running a red light into the river with a single swipe of Asura. When it was pulled out of the water, it wasn’t damaged. Nothing appeared wrong with it. But it never worked again.

When wielded as a physical manifestation of willpower, without the accompanying purification that *nen* inculcated, his thought could become nothing more than a crude, lethal weapon.

Kyoya wasn’t sure he had yet reached that stage. That was why he invited the poltergeists to take him on, testing himself, confronting the threat with a single blow and a minimal projection of *nen*, and then dispersing them without annihilating them.

When he said “Good enough,” he was referring to those possibilities of control.

After a few more minutes, he had everything ready to go. To allow him maximum movement, he put on a pair of stretch jeans and a training jacket. His only luggage was a nylon day pack stuffed with a change of clothes, towel, toothbrush and toiletries. He’d pulled five thousand yen out of the ATM on his way home. He didn’t imagine that a credit card would do him much good where he was going.

He wouldn't mind carrying some Shorinji Kenpo hidden weaponry into the battle, such as *shuriken* and *tetsugan* iron pills, but he didn't have any on hand, so that was that.

He left his aunt and uncle a letter stating that he'd be going on a trip for three days. He played hooky all the time to take off to parts unknown, so it wouldn't be anything to worry about. But Kyoya wasn't sure he'd be back in three days.

Not waiting for morning, Kyoya left the slumbering abode. According to the glowing face of his watch it was midnight, the tenth of September. Three days and three hours were left. He could drop by the Information Bureau and have a detailed knowledge of Shinjuku implanted via their auto-suggestion devices, but gave it a pass. He wouldn't be doing himself any favors trying to take shortcuts at this stage in the game.

As he hurried down the midnight streets to the robot bus stop, Kyoya addressed Asura in his left hand.

He was committing himself to this course. *Like you said, of my own free will.* It was a little late to be sorry about being such an unreliable son, *but right now, Dad, I'm going to need all the strength you can give me.*

Then he shrugged. No matter what, he still had to wonder how an ordinary high school student ended up going to a place like that—*Demon City*.

Part Three

The ruins stretched out before him.

Beneath the cold autumn moonlight, the black mountains of bricks and shattered concrete went on and on. Somewhere in the darkness, a wild beast howled. Judging from the lights, people must be living here. Not only that, but as he focused his gaze, hither and yon in the rolling hills of rubble, the outlines of buildings and unit housing came into view.

One structure soared toward the heavens. Another squatted next to the earth, indistinguishable from the surrounding wreckage.

If he concentrated even more, far in the distance he could make out the innumerable lights dotting the periphery, like the guard towers of a penitentiary. The watch towers of a prison—the metaphor was not necessarily inappropriate. The lights came from the windows and neon signs of the surrounding skyscrapers. To the north, the former Omiya and Kawagoe; to the south, Miura Peninsula dividing Tokyo and Yokohama; to the east, Narita; and to the west, Hachioji.

In one corner of the Tokyo megalopolis, these sad and abhorrent remains were exposed for all to see—they called it “Demon City” for short.

As if endeavoring to illustrate the source of that unfortunate name, a sense of dread shrouded the environs. It wasn’t only felt in the air, but somehow stained the starlight and moonlight as well. And the cold—not that of a winter’s night, but a chill that reached into the heart and soul—the cold of the wayward spirits embracing the visitor with unease and fear.

What was Demon City? It was once Shinjuku.

Back when Tokyo was still the Tokyo of old, the wards of Yodobashi, Yotsuya and Ushigome had been merged into a single city. It covered seven square miles

or approximately 4,500 acres. At the turn of the millennium, its population reached 270,000.

Shinjuku station occupied the city center. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex, Kabuki-cho, Hanazono, and the five buildings of the skyscraper district comprised the heart of the new city and its world-renowned shopping and entertainment district. The flow of the young and the adventurous went on all day and all night—until that fall night of September thirteenth.

That day, the entirety of Shinjuku—indeed, only Shinjuku—was leveled by a magnitude 8.5 earthquake directly beneath the city. Even worse, it struck like a surprise attack at three o'clock in the morning.

Since the 1980s, preparing for the next predicted “big one” to strike Tokyo—predicted to occur around the Izu Peninsula—the building codes had been modified to increase the earthquake resistance of the architecture. But the solidly-built reinforced steel and concrete structures and prefabricated residential wooden houses crumbled like papier-mâché in the face of this earthquake.

The pedestrians and homeowners sleeping soundly in their beds, the night-life revelers—all that concrete and steel became an avalanche that swept them away unmercifully and without distinction.

In a “normal” earthquake, the fires sparked in residential housing often posed a bigger threat than the collapsing structures. In this earthquake alone, eighty percent of the dead were killed in the first heave of the earth. There were no aftershocks.

Even the Japan Meteorological Agency abandoned the designation “Great Shinjuku Earthquake” in favor of “Devil Quake,” as the latter perfectly captured its nature and effect, unlike any that had come before.

First of all, the damage did not extend any further than Shinjuku proper.

For example, the Chuo line running from Ichigaya to Iidabashi was bordered on the east by Chiyoda Ward and on the west by Shinjuku Ward. The station employees on duty at Iidabashi could look across the outer moat of the Imperial Palace towards the soaring structures of Ichigaya and watch as they collapsed with a deafening roar, while on their side of the moat not even the air stirred.

They slapped their cheeks, thinking they must be dreaming—that's how they described the experience. As a result, even when the information was relayed to the fire and police departments, they didn't take it seriously at first, delaying the rescue operations. The Devil Quake was clearly limited to Shinjuku. Or rather, it specifically targeted Shinjuku.

Even within Shinjuku, the wreckage was distributed in a random fashion. The Isetan Mitsukoshi, Odakyu and Keio station department stores were leveled, while the Keio Plaza Hotel, the Sumitomo Bank “triangle” building and the rest of the Shinjuku skyscraper district suffered little more than cracks in the walls and broken windows.

When the “big one” hit, Chuo Park, a stone's throw away—despite being designated as an evacuation center—saw trees and shrubs yanked out by the roots, the ground tossed like the waves of the sea, as if the gods of the earth had gone mad and bolted for the surface.

Elsewhere, the pleasure quarters of Kabuki-cho and Hanazono presented the cruel irony of flattened wooden residences while the surrounding buildings managed to maintain their outward appearances.

At the same time, the Shinjuku Ward Building, the Koma Theater and the Pension Fund Association Building had their facades stripped away, but remained standing.

It was as if a giant catfish buried deep in the sludge had woken up and haphazardly thrashed about without rhyme or reason.

Had the destruction been confined to such irrationally distributed damage alone, the epithets of “Devil Quake” and “Demon City” should not have stuck. The portents were there all along, but its truly haunted nature didn't become apparent until the reconstruction efforts began.

One day, two weeks later, the disposal of the corpses was almost complete and the removal of the debris was underway. A work site that from all appearances was solid ground suddenly gave way and a dozen remote-operated bulldozers and cranes were swallowed up in the gaping pit.

This was just the beginning. Inexplicable phenomena began popping up in the ruins all over Shinjuku.

Five old-style M1 Abrams tanks on loan from the U.S. Army to the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya were trapped in a fissure. During the frantic recovery process, one of the guards let loose with a M91 assault rifle. And before he was gunned down, killed twelve of his fellow soldiers. The bullets punctured the reserve fuel tanks of the heavy duty crane, turning the recovery site into an inferno.

The reasons for this shooting incident were unknown.

Twenty patrol officers mustered into duty after the disaster to suppress riots and prevent the looting of precious metals were all found torn to pieces in the police dormitory on the grounds of Hanazono Shrine. Their bodies were drenched with blood and water. Before being chewed to death, several of them had, in fact, drowned.

Corpses went missing, and were later observed walking down Yasukuni Avenue, their insides falling out. Eerie screams were heard coming from the ruins of a certain building. The soldiers from the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces sent in to investigate never returned.

The supernatural phenomena never ceased.

Scientists were appointed to investigate the incidents. But once they had ascertained that the “causes” did not conform to any known natural laws, the committee was disbanded without coming to any conclusions. Except that the air bus the scientists were scheduled to leave Shinjuku in was destroyed just before their departure, and those scientists never made it home again.

A high priest was invited to conduct a requiem for the dead. While reciting the sutras, a gust of wind brushed against the side of his face. A second later, his body had dissolved into a muddy puddle of melted flesh, as the white bones continued to chatter the sutras.

The prime minister was in attendance and witnessed the whole thing. Half a year later, he called a halt to the reconstruction efforts in Shinjuku.

And so the name “Demon City” came into being. Ever since then, drawn to the magical miasmas springing to life in Shinjuku, a whole host of new residents came to call Demon City their home.

Outlaws on the lam, from run-of-the-mill swindlers and petty thieves down to the vilest robbers and murderers. Yakuza and street gangs too violent by the standards of street life outside Shinjuku. They soon graduated from the old tools of the trade like knives and chains to large-bore laser weapons in their killing sprees.

They were followed by the kingpins organizing around them factions and cabals, and extending the reach of their power and influence.

As time went on, the residents of Shinjuku grew more and more varied in kind and personality.

During the late twenty-teens, in conjunction with expedited World Federation space exploration efforts, a large number of space cyborgs had been sent from earth throughout the solar system. Many were injured or failed to adapt to the alien environments and returned to earth. But a faltering economy and difficulty finding gainful employment also put them on the road to Shinjuku.

The bewitched atmosphere of Demon City may have proved a comforting fit for their ravaged minds. In that respect, espers as well proved a no less onerous presence.

At the turn of the millennium, ESP research had produced equipment that could detect dormant ability and develop its potential power. A significant number of otherwise normal people with ESP abilities—both dormant and active—emerged. Along with these advances came testing and ranking on a worldwide scale.

As a result, top-grade espers were required to register with the World Federation. Some insisted on freedom and rights and refused, and an “illegal esper” movement began. Obtaining their own equipment through back channels, they amped up their abilities to frightening levels and began to pull off daring and dastardly crimes.

Shinjuku, a den of thieves the law couldn’t reach, was perfectly suited for their purposes.

In due course, law enforcement organizations around the world united for the purposes of imposing law and order on Shinjuku. Except that when they attempted to reconstitute the regular police force from before the Devil Quake,

the nightmarish incidents slowed activities to a crawl.

By this point, garrisons had been located on the borders between Shinjuku and the outside wards, staffed by a small number of regular police and commando units.

Demon City had already transformed into a city of super-criminals beyond their ability to manage.

Confronting cyborgs equipped with ultrasonic weapons that could reduce ferroconcrete structures to dust in seconds—degenerate espers who could turn an opponent's brain to mush through thought alone—yakuza wearing the World Federation Army's prized multi-functional fighting suits—against the likes of them, the ordinary beat cop armed with 9 mm semiautomatics with ten-round magazines and high-voltage nightsticks could accomplish next to nothing.

And so, with the scars of the disaster clearly in view, Shinjuku detached itself from civilization, practically from time itself. Now in 2030, in the center of the huge megalopolis of Tokyo, this strange and terrifying crime-ridden city continued to exist in its own twilight world.

The pale moonlight shone down on the road snaking through the reeking ruins. The shadow of a slight figure made its way from the old JR Yotsuya station to Yotsuya Sanchome. The outlines of her body glimmering faintly in the darkness, there was enough light to make out a young and pretty woman. Sayaka.

A look of worry and unease passed across her determined face. Her last hope—Kyoya—had turned her down. After a moment of anguish, she'd bolted from the Information Bureau.

To what end? To confront the sorcerer and defeat him. All she had in order to accomplish that goal was a laser ring on her right hand. Out of concern for the activities of anti-Federation factions, she wore it in self-defense. From the outside, it looked like a BB-sized ruby set into a gold mount. Inside was a tiny nuclear reactor and energy converter. Together they could spit out a laser beam powerful enough to melt glass.

Sayaka never liked the idea of having on her person a weapon that could kill people. She had it retrofitted with a paralyzing mode and usually kept it on that

setting.

No matter how powerful, defeating the sorcerer Ra—of whom it was said there was but one in the world his equal—would prove well-nigh impossible. Knowing that full well, Sayaka felt she had no choice, both for her father's sake and the sake of the world.

When she'd met with Kyoya at the Information Bureau, saving her father was the only thing on her mind. But as the Master explained the sorcerer's true motives, it kindled in her a renewed responsibility toward the world as a whole.

She couldn't say if this was because she was the daughter of the president. When she was younger, she'd been on a relief mission to a refugee camp with her mother when looters shot her dead without a second thought. The blood her mother spilled for the good of others undoubtedly spurred her on now.

But however heroic and high-minded her resolve, she hadn't given any consideration to tracking down her target. She'd sallied forth on the spur of the moment. For a well-bred young lady like herself, this was a bridge too far. She hadn't acted in haste so much as without thinking. The state of her dress and high heels—the same as before—and the way she stumbled and tripped down the road strewn with chunks of concrete and boulders, painted an all too precarious picture.

Nevertheless, she managed not to fall and arrived at the Yotsuya Sanhome intersection, the result of not only good luck but sharp senses and reflexes. The same skills that made her captain of her high school Aikido team. She came to a halt in the middle of the intersection.

"Go straight and I'll end up in Shinjuku's old High Street. If I turn right, I'll cross Akebono Bridge to the Defense Agency. Left, I'll end up at Shinanomachi station and Keio Hospital. If I were the bad guys, I'd probably go straight."

Before setting out, she'd at least taken the time to make quick use of the autosuggestion machine that Kyoya hadn't, and flashed her memory with a detailed geographical map of Shinjuku.

"All right then," she said to herself. "I'll keep on going in this direction."

Two or three steps later, she stopped. She sensed something around her.

Several things. Her eyes scanned the darkness to her left and right. Crimson points of light—eyes. And not just two or three pairs. The low growls revealed the rapacious nature of these carnivorous beasts.

Not man-eating leeches or giant rats. That left two-headed dogs, and put her in a very tight spot. When it came to dangerous animals, Demon City had its share of completely unique species. Rumor had it that specimens released from a joint public-private gene research laboratory during the Devil Quake had been further mutated by the magical miasmas.

Among these creatures—that would attack anything that moved—the two-headed dogs reached a good six feet in length and would take on a North American grizzly bear. From the prey’s perspective, an attack by one was not different than by two, making more than one quadruple the trouble.

Shinjuku Ward was surrounded by a fissure hundreds of feet deep and twenty yards wide that effectively kept the beasts penned up inside. One “good” side effect of the Devil Quake. Traffic between Shinjuku and the outside wards was controlled through a series of large gates in Yotsuya, Tsurumakicho in Waseda, and Yonchome in West Shinjuku. The gates were open twenty-four seven, as were the numerous watch towers equipped with a full array of electronic monitoring equipment and particle cannon emplacements, turning Shinjuku into the world’s most vigilantly guarded zoo.

The encroaching circle slowly tightened around Sayaka, trembling with the pleasurable promise of the kill and appetites sated. The growls ceased, perhaps due to that heightened sense of anticipation. The wild, feral smell struck Sayaka’s nostrils.

One pounced on her from the right. As she expected, a two-headed dog. The twin sets of fangs gnashed at her throat.

But Sayaka’s throat was no longer there. However prim and privileged she appeared from the outside, she dodged the attack with an unexpected quickness, focusing a paralyzing ray as the dog landed. The big frame toppled over.

Sayaka took off before the second one completed its leap.

Her memory proved true, and the road sloped down toward the entrance to the Sanchome station on the Tokyo Metro Marunouchi line. The roof had fallen in

but the steel shutters were up. The thinking was, rather than staving off a concentrated assault from the street, it was safer to fall back and ambush invaders from within.

Dogs came at her from both sides. She hit them with the paralyzer. They fell unconscious, blocking the road.

Sayaka leapt like a trout scaling a fish ladder, vaulted over the big canine torsos, and tumbled head-first through the entranceway. She hit the stairs, somersaulted, and stuck the landing. The rush of air lifted up her dress, revealing her well-formed legs and thighs. She hastily pressed it down again.

The move backfired. Raising dreadful howls, a two-headed dog clambered down the stairs. Its two mouths gaped wide, red tongues flicking out like flames from between its fangs.

Her aim was true but late. Struck by the animal's body, Sayaka tumbled across the tiled floor, striking the back of her head. Her consciousness wavered. Before her eyes, the pair of mouths and their spiky fangs closed on her. And the head of a different creature behind them.

Father—!

As hope vanished from her thoughts, her father and the face of a young man sprang up in her mind's eye. The raw breaths hot on her neck, Sayaka fainted.

She was suddenly resting much easier. Along with the smell of burning flesh, the primal screams faded to silence.

Someone patted her cheeks. "Hang in there, Miss."

Sayaka opened her eyes. Three men bent over her. Two of them wore leather jackets in the street gang style—they were human beings—and the other was a cyborg with a hairless metal skull, the heavy-duty interstellar type with especially wide shoulders. A space cyborg.

The shorter and smaller of the two gangbangers helped her to her feet. Four two-headed dogs lay on the ground around them, their bodies all scorched, with one still smoldering. A strange smell shrouded the cramped ticket area that made her sick to her stomach.

She was still a bit spaced out. She rapped the side of her head and said to her rather rancid rescuers, “Thank you very much.” She meant it from the bottom of her heart.

“Hey, no problem. Wanted to test-fire the little bugger. Turned out pretty handy for black market shit.”

The short man held up the heater gun in his right hand. He had a kindhearted face compared to his companions. Though that could be because he wasn’t missing his eyebrows and nose like the other human. Their clothing and black market weapons identified the three as being with one of the many street gangs that ruled Shinjuku.

Shorty’s big counterpart said, “Looks like the rest took off.” He glanced up the staircase. He looked a lot meaner and held a heater as well.

Shorty added helpfully, “You gotta be careful about going outside. No telling what could be creepy crawling around out there. You should take a break in here for a while.”

Sayaka followed the three onto the Marunouchi station platform. She recalled that the subway system was hit hard by the Devil Quake. This station, though, seemed to have come through relatively unscathed. Such were the whimsies of the Devil Quake.

A portable stove sat in a corner on the Yotsuya-bound side of the platform. Beer bottles and pressurized food containers were scattered about. The fire from the stove lit up the immediate environment. The three must have bivouacked here for the night.

“Want something to eat?”

Shorty held out one of the food packs. It was illustrated with a generic picture of stew and had a tiny fork attached. Despite having just narrowly escaped being eaten to death herself, Sayaka was suddenly very hungry.

“I appreciate it,” she said with a nod. She pulled on the ring. With a soft pop, the frozen, pressure-sealed synthetic meat and gravy began to swell and simmer as the chemicals in the thermal pad fused and heated. The pack expanded to the size of a dinner plate.

The other two men eyed Sayaka suspiciously as she ate, but didn't interrupt. When she was finished, she got out her wallet, and then realized that she didn't have any cash on her.

"Um," she said apologetically, "is there an ATM around here?"

The three blinked in surprise. Shorty grinned. "What, for the food? Naw, it's on the house."

"No, I really want to compensate you."

The big man leaned in and said, "In this city, keeping these heater guns of ours charged costs a pretty penny, you know. Fifty-thousand credits for the meal."

"Hey," Shorty said with a scowl. "Don't give the little lady a hard time. We're talking fifty tops for that."

Big Man ignored him. "How about it? Gonna pay up? Or maybe you can work it off."

Sayaka stared back at him blankly. Savors turning on a dime into extortionists was a new experience for her. She'd grown up in the harsh environment of the Moon colonies, where cooperation and good intentions were synonyms for survival. She had no personal understanding or practical experience with people who were bad on purpose. She couldn't imagine that Big Man and Cyborg contemplated selling her into the sex trade.

She'd followed her father to Earth only six months ago, so it was no wonder. "I don't mind working for my keep, but I'm in a bit of a hurry today. If you tell me your address, I'll see to it you're paid back later."

"What kind of fools do you take us for?" said Big Man, stepping toward her.

"C'mon, knock it off. She's just a kid."

Shorty interposed himself between them. And then floated skyward as Cyborg grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up. "Back off!" And tossed him off the platform. His arms flailing, Shorty hit the tracks and slumped unconscious between the rails.

"What did you do that for? There's no need for such violence!"

Sayaka rushed to the edge of the platform. Big Man grabbed her arm. Sayaka

screamed—not a scream, but a *kiai*, a martial shout. Followed by a grunt. That came from Big Man, his wrist wrenching painfully as he fell onto the platform in an Aikido joint lock.

“Prick.” Cyborg grabbed for her.

“I am not a man,” said Sayaka. She slipped through the alloy steel arms and fired her paralyzer.

The next scream came from her as well. She had misjudged the separation between them and the angle of attack. The beam reflected off Cyborg’s chest and hit her squarely.

“Stupid bitch. My skin and skeleton can withstand a thousand g’s of force. That toy ain’t gonna work on me.”

He easily hoisted her onto his shoulder. The reflected power of the paralyzer was significantly diminished, so Sayaka was already regaining consciousness. She tried to resist, but her body was too numb to move.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. She really was coming to her wit’s end. Paying no mind to Sayaka’s struggles, the Big Man walked up, rubbing his sides.

“Damn, what a pain in the ass that chick is. Still, nice piece of work. She’ll go for a pretty price. Easy living for a year, minimum. First thing in the morning, we head to Kabuki-cho and—”

“That’s not going to happen,” interrupted a voice from the shadows. “There will be no tomorrow for you two.”

Big Man and Cyborg exchanged puzzled glances, then scanned the dim interior of the station platform. Other than Shorty still slumped across the tracks, nobody else was there. Big Man pulled the heater from his belt.

“Come out, wherever you are!”

Something grabbed their feet. Big Man looked down. His blood ran cold. Two dirty rust-red hands grew out of the concrete. They didn’t break through. The wrists melded seamlessly into the floor.

“What the—! Let go!”

Big Man tried to pull free and back away. An even stranger apparition

appeared in front of him. Not releasing its hold on his ankles, the upper half of a human torso pushed itself out of the floor, like the fast-forward of a sprouting plant. Only when its entire body had “floated” to the surface did it let go and pop up head first, as if hinged at its feet.

It wore the mantle and hood of a Catholic monk that shadowed its face. But its radiating red eyes instantly robbed the spirit from the Big Man’s soul.

This was Doki.

Big Man stood there ramrod straight. Doki pushed him aside. Cyborg set Sayaka down on the ground and grabbed his heater. His self-confidence was of a fatal variety.

Six hundred thousand degrees of red-hot heat engulfed Doki. The waves of heat blew past him, cooking the walls to incandescent temperatures, turning the concrete back into sand.

“No good,” Doki laughed in a low voice. Not a wisp of smoke rose from his hood or mantle. The energy of the physical world had no effect on what came from the domain of the demons.

Fear confused Cyborg’s judgment. Instead of retreating, he ran forward, aiming at Doki’s chin. He threw a right hook with all his strength. At the moment of contact, Doki’s body scattered into a cloud of dust and dirt. It swirled around like a tornado of tea and whirled at Cyborg.

In the blink of an eye, Cyborg turned into a mud doll. “Welcome to my mystical mud inferno.” The last words Cyborg heard.

Unimaginable pressures shattered the alloy metal frame and pulverized the life support systems. A space cyborg that could withstand thousands of g’s collapsed like a junked automobile turned into so much scrap iron in a car crusher.

Big Man watched as Cyborg was squeezed to half its normal size. At the same time, the mud doll turned white hot. Doki’s “mystical mud inferno,” a trick crafted in the bowels of the Demon Realm. Millions of tons of pressure inside the film of mud trapped his opponent at the virtual center of the earth and crushed it to death. The fifty thousand degrees of heat reduced Cyborg to his constituent atoms, which were then absorbed into Doki’s body.

The mud doll disintegrated and returned to Doki's form. Though whether this was Doki's true form was anybody's guess.

By now, Big Man was ready to scare his own self to death first. He'd picked a fight with a real monster. With a girlish shriek, he ran toward the turnstiles. A small puddle was in his path. When Sayaka had taken him down with the joint lock, a couple of beer bottles had spilled their remaining contents onto the concrete floor.

The soles of his shoes touched the puddle. And then the floor wasn't there anymore. Big Man yelped. With a concrete-colored splash, he sank down to his waist in the spilled beer. In that spot alone, the puddle had turned into an ocean.

Still unable to move, Sayaka watched it all. *Only demons could do such things*. She had to get away. Only the part of her struck by the "ricochet" remained enfeebled, except it would probably take a good half-hour for the numbness to go away completely.

From the puddle of beer that had suddenly swallowed a whole human being came cries reminiscent of a man washed overboard and drowning in the Arctic Sea.

"It has been a while since I've used my Poseidon spell," said Suiki. "But what an awful-tasting person. The flesh is so stiff and hard."

"I was looking forward to a meal as well," Doki complained in an irritated voice. "Except for his brain, that last chap was all machine. And that was utterly flavorless as well. I'm sure the same goes for the head. Leave me an arm at least."

"You can snack on earthworms. Now this girl, she's a pretty one."

"Ah, our all-night search has not proved fruitless. It pays to listen to what's going on underground. Once the rite is complete, I will have the heart and brains."

"Fine. The liver and eyeballs for me. Well, shall we take her back to Sorcerer's abode? Incidentally, what does this curious ring do?"

"Leave it be. Nothing these humans prize is of any worth to us."

“True enough.”

Doki hoisted Sayaka onto his shoulder. She could feel the damp chill of the earth through the mantle.

What do they intend to do with me? It had something to do with a rite or sacrifice—that must involve meeting with this Sorcerer. But in this condition—and with these monsters hanging around—she wouldn’t be able to do a thing.

Despair filled her heart. Of all things, she had to become a prisoner of monsters the first day she visited Shinjuku.

She heard Suiki say something. From the far-away sound of his voice, he must be leaving.

“This terrifying enemy that Master Ra spoke of not long ago—he hasn’t shown up yet, apparently.”

Sayaka was amazed—that these creatures would refer to something as “terrifying.” And an *enemy*—perhaps—

“I do not know. Whatever sort of chap he is, in the face of my powers he will fare no better than these humans.” Doki spoke in unabashedly confident tones.

“That is true too,” Suiki chuckled.

Listening to the laughter of the two demons, Sayaka felt a spark of hope begin to grow in her chest. *He* was coming!

With her on his shoulder, Doki went through the turnstiles and climbed the stairs to the exit.

Then on the once-again tranquil station platform, a solitary figure appeared. Shorty. He’d been conscious since the demons appeared, but had played it safe and pretended to be dead.

“*Damn*. Monsters. Killed Ichi and Sav, and snatched the cutie as well. No way I’m letting that slide on my turf. You hold on there, Miss. I’ll rescue you.”

Muffling his footsteps, Shorty trailed after Doki.

Inside the Sanchome station on the Tokyo Metro Marunouchi line, where his two companions had been felled by magical means unimaginable and

unconstrained, a deathly silence returned to the lifeless platform.

Part Four

Kyoya was in Waseda. From his home in Mejirodai, he'd taken the Tsurumakicho bridge into Demon City. It was two in the morning. Just an hour before, Sayaka had been hauled away by a pair of demons. But of course, Kyoya knew nothing about that.

Right now he was burning with indignation. "I don't believe it! All the hotels are closed. What, they afraid the monsters are gonna carry off their daughters? They're the ones I came here to face off against."

His anger was somewhat misplaced but not necessarily far off the mark.

Despite its reputation, not everybody in Demon City was a criminal or yakuza. Some of those who'd escaped the jaws of death at the time of the Devil Quake had returned to their homes. Some whose family members or relatives had been killed moved into the abandoned houses. As a matter of course, they avoided those locations where the rowdier element held sway. Making up for the dearth of law enforcement in Demon City, they banded together to form self-policed areas.

The former grounds of Waseda University was one such safety zone.

The especially dangerous places in Shinjuku Ward—the shopping districts around the train stations, the Kabuki-cho and Hanazono neighborhoods—were rarely talked about in the outside world. At best, the heavily armed and equipped commando police made the rounds once a month. And then there were the rumors of reporters and television crews who'd snuck in and were never heard from again.

As a result, the mainstream media either wildly speculated or confined their reporting to the nominal safety of places like Waseda and Ochiai.

A video camera the size of a mole could be glued to the body and carried

anywhere. The problem was, images from Shinjuku promising to show the thrill and danger simply didn't. In the past, spy cameras had been smuggled into the High Street over and over. But all anybody ever saw on the screens were vast canvases of gray.

The demonic spirits inhabiting Shinjuku—Demon City—coveted their privacy such that nothing transmitted by radio waves was allowed in or out.

Through the virtual worldwide pipelines created by communications satellites and light fiber networks, the information society of the twenty-first century delivered to computers in every home more data in a day than any normal person could digest in a lifetime.

Perhaps no place on earth better epitomized these digital achievements than the Tokyo megalopolis. Thus the irony that smack dab in the middle of this most modern of post-modern societies was a deserted island, a hole of white noise and static.

Kyoya had rushed out of his house in the middle of the night in order to start making up this glaring deficit. Even waiting until morning would waste hours that couldn't be made up later. Better to hang out at an all-night bar or fast-food joint and get the low down from the people on the ground. Perhaps info about the hideout of the sorcerer and his monster bodyguards would emerge.

Now the stark reality of the place was sinking in. There was a neat row of prefab houses behind Okuma Auditorium where the Waseda University student apartments once stood. Here and there, streets and alleys dotted with stores and bars and “safe” hotels for the occasional adventure tourists.

But all he could do was stand there like an idiot. Every door was sealed as tight as a drum. However he knocked and raised a ruckus, the curfew was on and no new customers were being allowed in. It wasn't because everybody had gone to bed. Light seeped around the doorjambs and window shades. If he craned his ears, he could hear music playing inside.

The clubs and hotels announced on their marquees that they never closed for business. But as in Europe during the Dark Ages, fearing ghosts and goblins and things that went bump in the night, during these midnight hours they all held their collective breaths and pretended not to be home.

“Damn. That last diner was the sixth. I’ve been at this for half an hour. What the hell do they think a kid like me is gonna do to them? I suppose I could fake some injury and say I got mugged because they wouldn’t let me in. Next one that bars the door, I’m busting it down.”

He growled to himself, getting into a downright foul mood, when a dim glow fifty yards off beneath a street light caught his attention. It appeared to be the marquee of a diner.

“Ha! That’s the one for me.”

Perhaps the proprietor was a woman willing to show him some sympathy. Reinvigorated by this thought, he ran down the street. The diner was another prefab house converted into an all-night bar. The name on the marquee surprised him: “Musashi Miyamoto.”

The name of a famous Edo Period swordsman. Making that the name of a retail establishment was rather odd.

“Sounds like the owner has a few marbles loose upstairs. Just my kind of guy.”

The door was open. The interior of the bar was draped in shadows. The only illumination came from laser light fiber cables hanging from the ceiling. He could have sworn he’d heard *naniwabushi*—a traditional kind of Japanese narrative singing—accompanied by a *shamisen*. But there was no background music at all, not even some slow, depressing goth Muzak. The mood was ostentatiously gloomy.

At the back, opposite the entranceway, was a half-crescent bar with four barstools, and ten cheaply-made tables placed in an arc around it. The place looked larger inside than from the outside. The walls on the left and right were decorated with samurai swords and lances, as if in tribute to the shop’s namesake.

Kyoya spotted the source of the melancholic mood. At the table to the rear on the left, four men were engaging a young woman in some sort of conversation. Every time her shoulders shook, a low sob escaped her lips. This was no happy get-together.

The girl was seventeen or eighteen. Three of the men looked about the same age. The fourth was a large man in his thirties who sported a beard. His apron suggested that he was the bartender and proprietor. All his training through the long winter nights on Mt. Daisetsu had sharpened Kyoya's eyesight, such that he could make out this much detail in the dimly-lit bar.

Kyoya was wondering how to break the ice when the young man next to the woman casually turned and noticed him. The gaunt face changed in a flash from fear to anger to loathing.

"Hey everybody, he's here!"

The men all stood as one. The girl shrieked and clung to the young man.

"Son of a bitch! When?"

The bartender ran to the wall and grabbed a samurai sword. The steel glinted. This was the real thing, not an ornament. The others pulled weapons from the pockets of their jackets and jeans.

The guy the girl was hanging onto produced an old-fashioned H&K P9 semi-auto, eight-round magazine. Blocking the way, as if covering them, the kid with the long hair raised a policeman's electric nightstick. Behind him, his companion revealed a hand-held ultrasonic maser.

Crap weapons like that weren't much use in a real fight, but they radiated a killer vibe that along with their determined expressions made up for their deficiencies elsewhere.

Kyoya raised his hands. "I surrender. Think I could have a juice?"

A wave of uncertainty ran through the room. "You human?"

"Don't think you can play us!" warned the bartender, striking an aggressive stance, with the sword raised over his right shoulder.

Though the man appeared to have gotten a good deal of training under his belt when he was younger, he couldn't hide the slight trembling in his limbs. Whatever they were expecting to show up, it must be something pretty terrifying. Kyoya couldn't help playing with them.

"Whoa, you got me. I'm a four-hundred-year-old *tanuki* from Kabuki-cho,"

he said, referring to the lecherous shape-shifting raccoons from Japanese fairy tales. “I’ll take the lady, if you don’t mind.”

A bad joke like that should go over anywhere, but he was wrong. The girl screamed again. The bartender yelled and rushed him, swinging the blade down from above his right shoulder.

Kyoya dodged to the right, unleashing a sweeping kick to the man’s solar plexus with his left leg, checking the force of the blow.

He doubled over with a grunt. Kyoya reached around his back and wrenched the sword from him, then turned him around to face the others, using him as a shield. There was no need.

The guy with the gun restrained his companions. “That was a Shorin Kenpo turning kick, something I do know a little about. No way any monster around here would.” He tucked the gun into his belt. “Our bad,” he apologized. “We’re a little on edge, you know? I’ll buy you a round. The Moon wine’s good.”

“I appreciate it. But I’m a teetotaler these days. Got any Deimos beer?”

The name notwithstanding, Deimos beer was a soft drink made on the Martian moon. A mineral mined only on Deimos lent it its special taste and properties. For the past five years, it had beat out even Coca-Cola in sales. It was a favorite of Kyoya’s.

“Sure, we got that,” said the bartender. “Let go of me and I’ll get you one.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Kyoya released his hold.

“This way,” said the bartender. To the guy, “That’s okay, you’d better stick with Yuko-chan.”

The guy returned to the table where the girl was sitting. Kyoya sat down across from the bartender, who set a glass topped with the green liquid down in front of him.

“There you go.”

With a soft hissing sound, the bubbles gathered into a head. Kyoya downed it in a single swig. The cool liquid tingled all the way down to his stomach.

“Man. That hits the spot.”

“Yeah? Well, due to our little misunderstanding, it’s on the house. But I’m still gonna have to ask you to leave as soon as possible. Things are going to get real iffy around here pretty soon.”

“What that other guy said. You expecting to mix it up with a monster?” Kyoya’s eyes glowed with a fearless light. He was itching to get down to business with the demon element around here.

“Well, you sure look like an outsider, but this is Shinjuku. The last thing you’d expect is the first thing you should expect, things you’re better off not knowing about. So you should get going while the going’s good. Keep on going down the street out front and you’ll run into Waseda Boulevard. Take a right and after a twenty-minute walk, you’ll end up in Takada no Baba. You can find cheap lodgings there.”

“That’s cold, man. I’m a coward, see. When the sun goes down, my feet turn to jelly. Chase me out of here now and I wouldn’t be able to take another step.”

“How’d you get here in the first place, then?”

“Closed my eyes. With a little light to guide me, though, I really come on strong. You saw, right?”

The bartender shrugged. He jerked his chin at the young woman. “What’s after that girl, no bunch of chopsocky is gonna stop.”

“And what good’s some antique handgun and a bunch of sharpies a quack surgeon wouldn’t bother with?”

The bartender flashed a look of annoyance at Kyoya’s quip, then smiled. “You’re a strange one. So what exactly can you do?”

“Leave it to me,” Kyoya said with an exaggerated nod. “Jesus Christ at your service.”

The bartender sighed. He must be thinking the kid was some sort of scatterbrained thug. He said under his breath, “Fine. I’ll let you in on it. Because once you hear what I have to say, you’ll be running home to mama.”

“I’m sure I will,” he said, as surely as he knew he wasn’t.

The bartender leaned on his elbows and said, “That bunch over there, they

work at a supermarket down the street. Good people, especially the girl in the middle.”

“Nice looking, too. What, she a D-cup? What’s her name?”

“Yuko Sano. Hey, you’re too young to look at women like that. Well, whatever. She is a babe. And just to keep our facts straight, that’s a doubleD.”

Kyoya grinned. “And?”

“What it looks like. Hot-to-trot youngsters like yourself going in there and just *looking*. Lately there’s been more punks in the neighborhood than regular folks. Gives the place a bad feeling, you know?”

“Figures.”

“But Yuko-chan don’t give a damn about any of them players. She’s got her own true love, Susumu. The kid who picked you out before.”

“Well, I’m jealous.”

“They’re gonna get married and run the shop together. Their friends got their backs. Sure, they all wanted Yuko for themselves, but they’re stand-up guys when it comes to doing the right thing. Nobody’s looking to cuckold Susumu.”

“Yeah, but a man’s still a man. Old-fashioned chivalry is rare these days.”

The bartender answered with a fierce expression. “They may be young, but they got better character than you. Anyways, a month ago, Yuko-chan got a strange letter. Like that old parchment, you know, made out of animal skins or whatnot. The letter says: *A month from now, we will come for you. You cannot run. You cannot hide. Speak of this to no one.* No return address.”

“Got it. And today’s the day? That’s kind of a leap, isn’t it? Thinking it was a monster at work?”

The bartender rolled up his right sleeve and showed Kyoya the inside of his upper arm. “As soon as she read it, the letter attached itself to her arm, right here. Nothing can remove it. The doctors say it’s sheepskin, all right, and it’s been assimilated right into the arm. They’d have to remove the flesh to get it off. So there it stays.”

He added in a hushed voice, “I’ve been running this establishment since the

big earthquake. Ever since, every month, a pair of girls go missing, minimum. And there's a definite pattern. Some young babe gets a letter just like Yuko did. Then no matter how many cops and bodyguards, exactly a month later, she goes missing."

"You don't say."

"Fact is, nobody knows what the hell is going on. Nobody in charge is talking. The rumors say that five years ago the daughter of a gang boss in Yotsuya was targeted. He stuck by her side, surrounded by a hundred of his heavily armed henchmen. What do you think happened?"

"I'd hazard none of 'em were ever seen again."

The bartender nodded, which surprised Kyoya. Nobody had a sense of humor in this place.

"Not hide nor hair," the bartender said under his breath. "It's been going on nonstop ever since. Every time, no matter what steps are taken, nobody can protect the targeted girl. No matter where she ran, or where her parents might hide her—every attempt to leave Shinjuku would be mysteriously frustrated—on the appointed day she would disappear. Nothing but a monster could pull off something like that."

"Sure sounds like it. But has anybody actually seen them in action?"

"They have. But whenever any try to talk about it, they get hit by bad luck or an accident, so they keep mum. According to the story I heard, on that day at three in the morning, a funeral wagon pulled by a skin and bones black horse comes for the girl. And the coachman is—"

"The Grim Reaper?" Kyoya grinned at the image. "A letter written on parchment, a funeral wagon at three in the morning—whoever's behind it must be old school in a big way. Sounds like something a crazy man would concoct."

The bartender said sullenly, "Just because it's a rumor don't mean it's not true. He ain't carrying a sickle, but he sure as hell is the God of Death, all dressed in black and all. Nowadays, the sound of a horse's hooves is a bad omen. When the time approaches, everybody in the neighborhood of a targeted girl closes the shutters and bars the doors and waits for the danger to pass. It's harsh, but that's

what fear does to people.”

“It’s the smartest thing to do. But why aren’t you? Go out on a limb for her, and you’ll go down with it when it’s sawn off.”

The bartender flushed with rage. “As soon as Yuko-chan saw that letter, she knew her fate was sealed, ’cause I’d told her what I just told you. From then until the day before yesterday, she kept it to herself. Didn’t say nothing to nobody. Her parents died in the Devil Quake. And if she told Susumu, she knew he’d die defending her. Didn’t see any reason for more pointless deaths. Susumu only found out because one day when they were all out together, he noticed the letter on her arm. Nobody’s so cold-hearted that they could run away saying it didn’t have anything to do with them. Even when they came here to talk about it, she cried and said she didn’t want to get me involved in something like this. She wouldn’t put her own self ahead of us. As long as there’s a girl like that left in a city like this, there’s still hope, you know? There’s no way we can let the likes of you waltz in here and do as you please, no matter what the odds.”

The bartender paused, and added in a barely audible voice, “Fact is, I’ve got a thing for her myself.”

“You’re a good man,” Kyoya softly replied.

He slid off the stool. The bartender held out his hand. “See you around, kid. I know we haven’t known each other long, but keep the little bar in your thoughts.”

“Save the goodbyes,” said Kyoya, waving off the handshake. He picked up Asura from where he’d leaned it against the counter and turned to the table where the four others were sitting.

“Hey!”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. Good intentions, okay? There’s nothing you can do for her. Leave it to me, old man.”

He spoke in a purposely loud voice. The four looked at him with surprised expressions. Susumu said in an angry voice, “What are you doing here? Get your jollies somewhere else.”

Kyoya calmly stood in front of him and clapped him on the shoulders. “Take it easy. A hot-blooded man has got to know when to play it cool. That’s what the girls fall for. You’re a popular one, I bet. Got a whole harem on the side, eh? C’mon, you can tell me. Don’t hold back.”

Yuko looked at Susumu with sad eyes. “Is that true?”

“D-don’t be silly. He’s joking, he’s joking! Hey, what’s your problem?”

Kyoya got a chair from another table and sat down next to Yuko. Ignoring Susumu, he took her slender hand in his. The letter was fused into the fleshy part of her upper arm, above the right elbow, covering about four by six inches long of skin. Just as the bartender had said, dark red letters were etched into a charcoal brown background.

“The blood of a lamb on lambskin,” Kyoya muttered. “Still doing it the medieval way. The Demon Realm sure isn’t one to embrace progress.”

He placed his right hand on the letter and closed his eyes and swiped his hand down her arm, as if brushing off a piece of lint.

“Ah!” Yuko cried out, her voice shaking the heavy gloom. “It’s gone. Not a trace left!”

“I guess that means you’re free. Congratulations.”

Four pairs of eyes stared at Kyoya in amazement. He smiled like a craftsman being praised for his wares.

“How in the world did you do that?” said the bartender. “Who are you?”

“Like I told you, I’m an exorcist.”

“You said you were Jesus Christ.”

“Either way. The techniques I use to help people are industrial secrets. Don’t ask me who I am. No time for explanations, except that the bad guys use this letter to home in on the victim, like a GPS tracking system. Erase it and Yuko-chan should be safe. They’ll grab me instead.”

They all stared at him.

The way Kyoya planned it, he’d disguise himself as Yuko and steal into the

enemy's hideout. He had no idea who'd be waiting for him there, but they were kidnapping young women in order to perform some sort of human sacrifice, so he was pretty sure the Sorcerer would reveal himself. He'd turn the tables and grab him instead, bust a few chops and get the mark of the *Nidom* deleted.

However, he had to wonder about the odds of sneaking into the heart of enemy territory and making it out alive. Or whether that would even save the president's life. What would become of the world afterwards was beyond a high school student's knowledge.

"Well. Sorry about this, Yuko-chan, but perhaps I could borrow your blouse and dress? I'm not exactly the feminine type. I'll need a disguise. Not like it's gonna fit. No matter, I'll just drape it on. Maybe some lipstick and go heavy with the face powder? We're talking about a bunch of hell beasts, not like they could tell the difference. Wait a minute—I'm making this way too complicated. You got a jacket or something I could wear?"

"In the back room. But with the letter gone, there's no reason for them to show up here."

"Yes, that would be a problem. Which is why I got it right here."

Kyoya rolled up his sleeve. Everybody gasped again. The abominable parchment was affixed to his bicep. As Yuko wordlessly watched, he glanced at his watch and said, "It's ten to three. My ride should be arriving. Give me your jacket. What are you looking at? Am I that scary?"

"No." Yuko shook her head back and forth. "No. But who are you? Why did you come here? Why are you trying to save us?"

"The old man put you up to this?"

"Naw. Truth is, I'm a sucker for any babe sporting an impressive pair like that."

Kyoya grinned like a wolf. Susumu struck a threatening pose. Kyoya paid him no mind. Instead, he presented his right cheek to Yuko. "I'll take a payment in kind."

As expected, Yuko turned to Susumu. Seeing his flustered state, she made up her own mind, flung her arms around Kyoya's neck and gave him a smooch on

the cheek. The image of only one face rose up in the back of his mind—long hair hanging down to the waist, tears welling up in earnest black eyes even as she held them back.

Why her—he felt a painful twinge in his chest. He gently pushed Yuko away. “Thanks. If I ever make it back here, I’ll be sure to—”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

With a dull *whoosh*, what looked like a plastic bag fell onto Asura’s hilt. It’d been flung across the room. Kyoya reached for Asura, propped up next to him, taking in the situation before him.

Except there should be no one else in the place, let alone sitting at the table opposite them. Their eyes all focused on that dimly-lit corner of the room. A shadow floated there at the table.

Asura’s sheath fell to the floor. This time, Kyoya assumed a true fighting stance. He didn’t sense magic in the air, so he didn’t think this the doings of the Sorcerer. Except that anything or anybody that could steal into this bar without him noticing could be no ordinary customer.

The shadow slowly turned towards them. The pale face of a young man, his long forelocks hanging down around his face. The dim lighting made his cheeks appear drawn and narrow. He looked around twenty. A black cape covered him down to his ankles. His turtleneck and slacks were black as well. Together with his somehow refined countenance this created the image of an elegant mage.

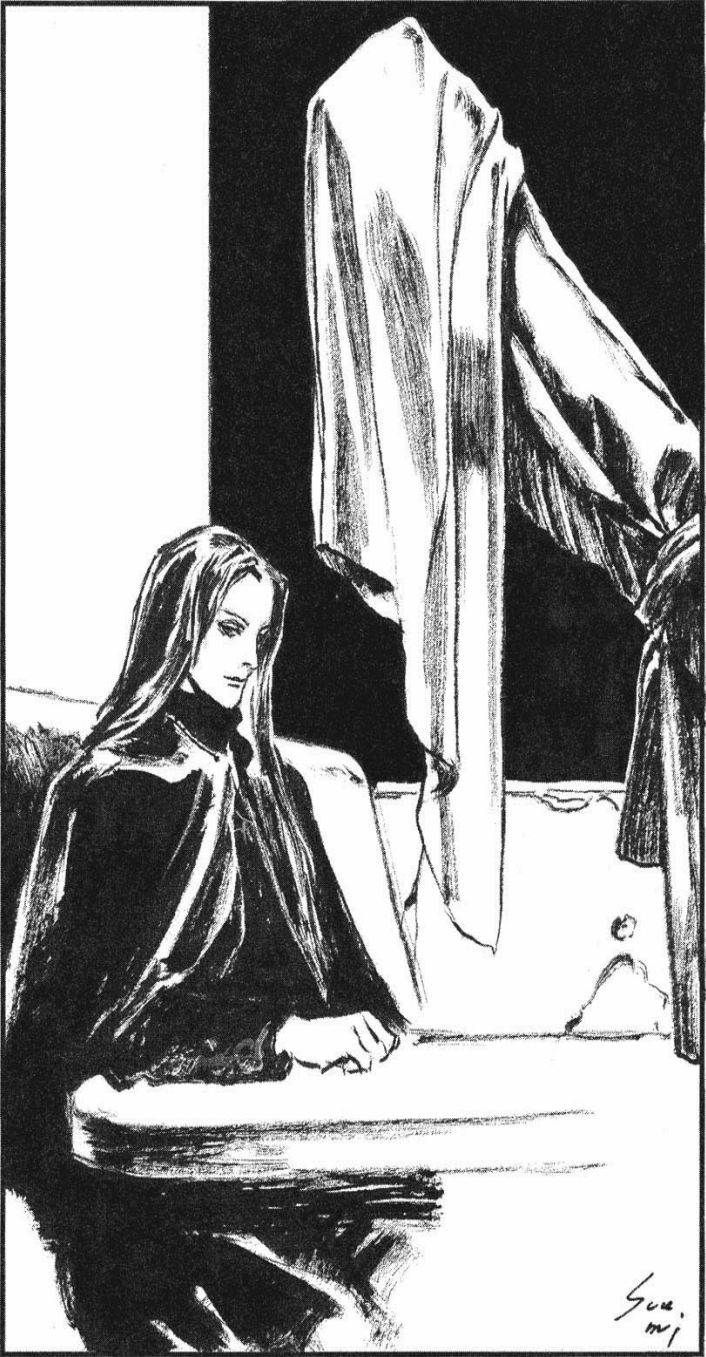
“Who are you? When did you come in here?” The bartender’s voice trembled, clearly suspecting him to be a demon.

“I am Doctor Mephisto,” the shadow answered readily. “I was passing by. The door was open. So I came in. Excuse me for intruding, but I happened to overhear the entirety of your conversation.”

Aside from Kyoya, the five gasped. They were more startled than when Kyoya removed the tattooed letter. The name seemed to strike a bell.

Kyoya asked, not taking his eyes off the man, “Barkeep, who is this highfalutin’ Dracula? Looks Japanese, but that’s no Japanese name.”

“Word is, the same man who took on a bad-ass gang of cyborgs in Kabuki-cho. They called themselves the *Freaks*, as I recall. He wiped them out single-handedly. Can’t vouch for him myself, but in a dangerous world, his is a name that carries a lot of weight.”



There was a touch of awe in the bartender's voice.

"Huh. A big man at his age. Well, if he pipes down and doesn't get in my way, then I've got no problem with him taking up space. We've got ourselves a bit of a situation here."

He was about to toss back the bag when Mephisto stopped him. "You had better hold onto that. A token of our new friendship."

"You've got weird tastes. A box of Yoneya *yokan* jellies would be more my thing."

"That is a shape-shifting mask, made from specially-engineered macromolecule polymers. Put it on and look at the person you wish to become, and in five seconds it will adapt its shape to match. I can't speak to the matter with great precision, but even with switching ownership of the letter, your foes should have no trouble telling the difference between boys and girls."

Kyoya looked back at Mephisto, and then at his watch. It was five before three. "What are you giving me this thing for? Don't count on getting it back."

The silhouette laughed silently. "My, aren't you the gallant one when the suffering of a lady is concerned. I do not know what your purposes are, though it seems you wish to infiltrate a den of vipers. I doubt that will happen if you reveal your true nature here. They would still go after her. You'd best don the mask. It will take care of the rest."

Kyoya hadn't the slightest idea how trustworthy this chap was, but had to come to a decision. "I'll take you up on that."

He turned and drew the mask over his head and looked at Yuko. Aside from eyeholes, there wasn't a mouth or nose. But it affixed itself to his face like a living thing. In a flash, it assumed Yuko's colors and contours.

"Even the hair is the same!" Susumu blurted out. In less than thirty seconds, Yuko's face at least had a twin.

"Till we meet again," came a quiet farewell from the door.

They all turned. A gust of September wind swirled in as the door opened and closed. The black-clad young man vanished into the night.

“That was an odd one,” Kyoya said to himself. “Wouldn’t mind running into him again.”

In his ear, he heard the sound of hooves. Yuko hugged her arms across her chest. More than the outside breeze, the chilling demonic miasma filled the bar.

“Sounds like they’re on their way. We’ll wait here. You’d better lay low for now.”

The face was that of a pretty girl, but the utterly incongruous voice was that of a young warrior looking to throw down with a very bad lot.

The metronomic *clop clop clop* of the hooves and creak of the wagon wheels came to a stop in front of the bar. Four pairs of eyes focused on the door. Yuko and Susumu had retreated deeper inside.

What sort of creature would present itself? The door didn’t open, but in *it* came. From Kyoya’s upper arm directly to his brain: *Open the door and come out. You have been chosen as the tribute to be offered up in the rite. Resistance is useless.*

Not a voice, but pure thought. And not the thoughts of anything in this world. No sooner had they stolen into his head but Kyoya felt their repressing presence eating away at his will.

No matter how firm his spirit and mighty his resolve, a human being could do nothing in the face of the dictates of the Demon Realm but obey—like a marionette dangling from the devil’s string—that was how simultaneously terrifying and numbing these thoughts were.

Even as he checked their progress within the walls of his own intention, Kyoya could not help but be amazed. Perhaps the letter executed a kind of mind-control circuitry. A clever trick. Human beings could be induced to flip out and go on mad killing sprees or commit suicide upon receipt of such a “letter.” Who was to say such things hadn’t happened in the past?

The beckoning call intensified. If he was tardy, they might get suspicious. Kyoya tucked Asura back into its sheath and held it against his chest and set off with a pigeon-toed gait. He’d left his day pack in the back. All he had in his pocket was his wallet. He had to travel light. Yuko’s jacket was on the tight side,

leaving not much room for anything else.

“Wait a second,” said Susumu. Kyoya turned around and he continued, “You going? At least tell us your name.”

“Oh, please,” he said in a woman’s voice. “I’m Yuko.”

“Thank you,” Susumu said, a bit confused by his appearance but meaning it from the heart. “Be sure to make it back in one piece.”

“Of course.” And he giggled daintily.

“Hope to see you again,” came the bartender’s heartfelt voice.

With a final wave, Kyoya—wearing Yuko’s face—opened the door and left. The magical miasmas mingled with the wind and danced down the street. Just like the stories said, a wagon pulled by black horses was waiting. It wasn’t a funeral wagon but a fashionable nineteenth-century European model called a *barouche*, an open-topped coach drawn by a pair of horses.

Not that Kyoya would be familiar with that degree of detail. What he did know was that the driver perched high on the coachman’s seat was casting off the ghostly wind. Though his monk’s garb and hood lent him a human appearance, there was no question that this was a demon.

As Kyoya’s eyes adapted to the dark, the pale hands holding the reins took on a light of their own. The reins were looped around the bridles of the rail-thin horses, a demon species that stood there not moving, not breathing.

He tottered a bit on purpose as he approached the carriage, like a reed being tugged back and forth in the breeze.

“Yuko Sano?” asked the coachman, not turning to look. His voice was low and cold, devoid of humanity.

Kyoya nodded.

Without a sound, the door of the *barouche* opened and a small step descended.

“Wait,” ordered the coachman, as Kyoya was about to step into the carriage. At some point he’d directed his attention down at him. “Your obedience is admirable, but what is that you have in your arms? You appear different from

before.”

Kyoya had assumed that the coachman would not have set eyes on Yuko before. Still, he had considered this possibility as well. He said in a teary voice, “My father’s prized wooden sword. I do not know what fate awaits me, but with this in hand, I will face it.”

With these words, he tilted his sad face at an angle visible to the coachman. The coachman’s eyes glowed out of the black depths of the hood, but couldn’t discern any differences in the faces, identical as two peas in a pod.

“Well, however you may pretend otherwise, human weapons mean nothing in our domain.” He cackled and reoriented his gaze forward again. He said nothing about discarding Asura. Kyoya climbed in. The barouche raced off in a gust of wind.

As good as his night vision was, darting through the mountains of rubble, Kyoya couldn’t tell where they were going or how fast they were getting there. After twenty minutes, the barouche stopped before an impressively tall building. The characters on the facade spelled out Big Box, the name of a once-popular Shinjuku department store. Beneath the facade, the giant mural of a man running had crumpled down around his chest.

“Go down the stairs in the lobby to the lower level.”

“Yes, yes. You don’t have to be so bossy about it.”

He stepped down from the carriage. The coachman shook the reins and galloped off.

“Idiot. What’s he gonna do if I run off right now?”

The question was soon answered. The letter on his right arm again began to exert control over his mind, urging him through the entranceway—the doors long ago destroyed—and inside the building.

The expansive lobby was filled with piles of debris that had peeled off the walls and ceiling. Kyoya didn’t sense any living creatures there, but he soon understood that this was one of the Sorcerer’s hiding places.

The unearthly aura about the place was different. Shuttered in darkness, the

lobby was filled with voices of anguish and damnation that brought to mind the curses of vengeful ghosts writhing in a sea of blood.

A normal human without a heightened sixth sense would still feel that chill running down the spine, and keel over as the blood fled the brain in fear. Kyoya could clearly hear the lamentations of the dead that suffused these dark quarters, welling out from the stairwells to the basement levels like desperate souls scrambling from a sinking ship.

The murdered girls and those who came to save them, sealed up here by the power of magic. He had come to set them free.

Ruled over by the forces of the unknown, and maintaining the pretense of being a terrified girl, Kyoya descended the stairs. At the bottom was a damp corridor. Following the letter's "instructions," he arrived at a big room.

The strong smell of blood struck his nostrils.

In better times, the room had been a cafeteria. Along the walls opposite the entrance were counters for serving food. In the middle of the room was enshrined a black altar. Next to it, three stands holding black wax candles bathed the room in a dim, flickering glow.

Manacles and shackles hung from the wall on the right, evidence that the room also served as a torture chamber. The wall on the left showed the marks of a fresh plaster finish. The floor was stained red from blood.

Here the anguished voices rose nearly to a scream.

The letter propelled him toward the right-hand wall. The intent must be to secure him with the restraints. But an extra set of hands was necessary. He didn't know if the Sorcerer himself would make an appearance, but somebody would have to show up to get the job done. At that point, the fight would begin.

Kyoya walked over and stood with his back against the wall. In the next moment, the shackles and manacles moved of their own accord, snaking out and affixing his feet to the floor and yanking his hands over his head.

"Ouch!"

Despite the surprise attack and raising a throaty shriek, the enemy did not

appear. His arms and legs were firmly pinioned and immobilized. A first-rate blunder on his part. Asura tumbled to the floor.

He jerked his limbs. The chains didn't budge. The magical forces at play were as strong as an industrial electromagnet. Kyoya bit his lip. *Shit, this is dangerous.*

A cold, dark gust of wind. The candle flames wavered. A black-robed man holding a long sword strode into the room. He was tall and lean. More than his chiseled Middle Eastern features, what caught Kyoya's attention were his crimson eyes gleaming redder and brighter than the candle flames.

Eyes devoid of pupils. This was the "Hell Eye," the mark of those who had sold their souls to the Demon Realm and parted permanently with their humanity.

The Sorcerer Rebi Ra.

It was a toss up between *At last!* and *Bloody hell!* Within three hours of entering Shinjuku, Kyoya Izayoi had met the man he was after, though he could hardly call his present situation "lucky."

The Sorcerer turned to where Kyoya was fastened to the wall and growled, "I've been waiting for you, Izayoi."

Kyoya gaped back at him. That the man was the Sorcerer could not be in doubt. Even the demon coachman hadn't seen through the disguise. So when—and how—had this guy figured it out?

With a faint smile, the Sorcerer continued. "I wouldn't have imagined that you'd disguise yourself as a girl. The face is splendid, to be sure, but is that your doing?"

Kyoya feigned ignorance. "What are you talking about? Where is this place? What do you plan to do with me? Let me go home."

He wouldn't give himself high marks on that performance. As expected, the Sorcerer's smile didn't leave his face. "Enough with playing the fool. I have known your true nature since you arrived in the barouche. However you may pull the wool over the eyes of an inexperienced demon, I am not so easily deceived. You may appear a woman, but the moves make the man. The watchful

eyes, the taking of each step—since you showed me the way of the sword in the Himalayas, they have not changed a bit.”

Damn, thought Kyoya. The guy was a bit off the mark, but his cover was clearly blown. Still, being exposed so quickly didn’t sit at all well with his pride. He might as well mess with him a while longer.

“Oh, that sounds so terrible! The Himalayas, where those abominable snowmen eat you alive? No way! Let me go home! Don’t you try anything funny, you perv! Mommy!”

He blubbered and squirmed. The buttons of the jacket—already stretched to the limit—popped off and rained down on the floor.

A flicker of doubt rose to the Sorcerer’s face. “The man who trained with me would not deport himself so in the hour of his death. And the frame of the body is smaller. But even a disciple would not so closely echo those movements. Ah, that explains it. You are Izayoi’s child.”

Even with this insight, Kyoya wasn’t ready to concede. “Yes, yes, I’m Kyoko.”

The Sorcerer laughed out loud. Just as quickly, the icy glare returned to his face. He drew closer. “Little brat. Show me your face.”

With a swipe of his cold fingers, the mask tore away and dropped to the floor.

“Holy crap, that’s a relief.” Kyoya grinned. “I’m better looking than my dad, huh?”

The Sorcerer grunted in barely concealed admiration. “What I would expect from the scion of Genichiro Izayoi. You’ve got pluck, I will grant you that. Though if you knew the fate that awaited you hence, you would be begging for your life instead.”

“Oh, scary! Before the crying fits begin, could you answer me one thing?”

“What would that be?”

“That *Nidom* thingy stuck in the president’s neck, how about you yank it out?”

The Sorcerer said with a frigid smile, “Idiot. You think I would agree?”

“Well, no. But I thought I might as well try reason before resorting to

violence.”

“You think you could? The way you are right now? I don’t know what powers your father left you with, but those shackles contain psychokinetic power equal to ten megatons of TNT.”

“I guess the only way to know is to try,” he said drolly.

Briefly arrested by the lively look in his eyes, like those of a completely different person, the Sorcerer faltered. The kid wasn’t mourning his fate or going down without a fight.

“Then how about this,” Kyoya wisecracked. “This thing you’re trying to summon—even Master Rai doesn’t know what it really is. The last time you tried—and screwed up royally—you turned Shinjuku into this mess. The monster have a name? The Prince of Darkness? Satan?”

Seeing the look on the Sorcerer’s face stiffen, Kyoya thought he might have struck gold. But then the Sorcerer smiled. “Ha! Satan? That’s what you fools think? The God of the Underworld breaks out of his subterranean prison and brings on the Apocalypse, like in some old-fashioned horror show?”

The Sorcerer Rebi Ra howled with laughter. “No!” he roared at the top of his lungs. “No! To think I would attempt to beckon from the darkness of the Demon Realm such prosaic stuff of children’s fairy tales!”

“Then what exactly?”

To Kyoya’s insistent question, the terrifying answer emerged. “The human race knew it once already!”

“Knew what?”

“That which created the present human race—or rather, that which created this world.”

The truth came out. Kyoya blanched. “God, you’re talking about God Almighty!”

“Relax. God and the Demon Realm have been enemies since time began.”

Then what was he babbling about? Kyoya wracked his brains. The bottomless evil of plunging the planet into despair and terror and ultimately turning it into

the Demon Realm—humanity knew it once already?

That made no sense. Then why didn't the rest of the world look like Shinjuku?

As if caught in a chance ray of sunlight, a thought glittered at the back of his mind, a fragment of a vaguely formed idea about how evil came into the world. But there was no way—

“Something occur to you, boy?” said the Sorcerer, examining Kyoya's astonished expression. “You will die here regardless. You'll learn the truth then. After I have devoured your soul.”

“For the right price.”

“Ha. You do change moods fast. You could grow on me. If you weren't Izayoi's son, I would let you live on as my subordinate and educate you in the ways of evil.”

“No, really, I'm adopted,” said Kyoya, as straight-faced as a college student taking an oral exam. “I'll listen to anything you have to say. So how about you untie me? Eh, Boss?”

The remaining contours of the Sorcerer's eyes gleamed with loathing and murderous intent. “This is true courage or the ravings of a madman. How your father would weep to hear you now. I could not imagine the son of Genichiro Izayoi betraying his memory so. A pity.”

The Sorcerer grasped the hilt of the sword.

“Okay. Hold on a second. One more question. Last one, promise. How many of those lackey monster bodyguards do you have, Boss? If you're not gonna let me become a henchman, I guess that makes them my enemies. I'll have to take 'em out too. So, for future reference, what do you say?”

“The damned fool still thinks he will be leaving here alive? Fine, I'll tell you. There are three. Kaki, Suiki, Doki. Right now they are in a sanctuary elsewhere, preparing to offer another lass to the Demon Realm. We have two havens, tied to the movement of the stars.”

“Where is it? And what kind of powers can these three wield?”

Though while posing the question, Kyoya could not help but regret that yet another innocent girl was being offered up as a sacrifice. Come to think about it, the proprietor of the Musashi Miyamoto said that two girls went missing every month.

He did not know then that this girl was none other than Sayaka.

The Sorcerer did not deign to answer this last question. He pointed the sword, still in its sheath, at the wall opposite where the marks left by freshly-applied plaster were still evident.

“Let the undead come forth.”

Amidst the eerie cries of the deceased, a fissure ran down the wall. With a series of dull thuds, the thick layers of plaster shattered and scattered across the floor. Seeing what was behind the wall, now revealed through the gaping hole, Kyoya grimaced.

The bodies of the dead. Not a mere corpse. Not one or two. Dozens of decomposing bodies were packed into the cavern. Standing upright, kneeling, lying on their backs, slumped against each other—all clothed in rotting garb and crawling with maggots, eyeballs dangling from their sockets, the disintegrating flesh exposing their ribs and shoulder blades.

Weeks must have passed since their murders, and yet the stench of death was almost non-existent. In fact, their chests seemed to rise and fall, as if they were breathing. They truly were the “living dead.”

“Surprised?” prodded the Sorcerer, surmising that the silent Kyoya was dumbfounded by the atrocious sight before his eyes. He leaned forward and whispered, “The girls who visited with us here and the remains of their parents and brothers and lovers who stupidly came to rescue them. I laid them on the altar and performed my surgeries, the dark rites necessary to continue the covenant with the Demon Realm. Just thinking about it stirs the blood, blood offered up to the Demon Realm, and together with that luxuriating heat, the sum of their souls. Every last one of them begs for death before the operation is even half-complete. *Relax*, I tell them. *I’m all ears. But give me your soul and I will put you out of your misery with a single, benevolent thrust.* They consent, and on the altar they sign the proffered parchment with their own blood. And I keep

my promise.”

Recalling atrocities committed in the past, the Sorcerer’s face twisted with ecstatic joy. Spittle flew from the corners of his mouth. Kyoya looked on with a distressed expression as the heretical monologue continued on uninterrupted.

“Frightened? So horrified you cannot speak? And so it is. But we have not yet arrived at the end. They are definitely dead. And though dead, cannot sleep well. Because I possess their souls. Their bodies will not disintegrate as long as their contracts remain intact. Arrested in the half-living, half-decayed state you have witnessed, never returning again to the dust, they remain plastered into the wall, confined and immobilized in the cramped darkness, consigned to the torments of hell.”

“Yeah, and what’s with that, anyway?” Kyoya asked in strangely subdued tones. “Once you got their souls, why not send ’em to the Demon Realm, posthaste?”

“Oh, so you found your voice, did you? Fine, I’ll tell you. The cries of such tormented souls is the purest music I can imagine. Every time I hear them pleading for the release of a true death, I get simply giddy, and tell them to weep and wail some more. Besides, the greater the pain I give them, the more obedient they become to my commands. Like this!”

The Sorcerer waved his hand as if to beckon them. The undead stood in front of the wall. There was a tapping sound like falling drops of water as the maggots tumbled from their eye sockets and plopped onto the floor.

“I shall leave your *surgery* to them. It might prove a tad rougher process than becoming my apprentice. If you cannot bear it, feel free to scream and bellow like them, and offer up your soul in exchange for a speedy death. Get him!”

At the Sorcerer’s signal, the mob of undead moved forward.

“No way,” Kyoya muttered. A deep sense of anger and pathos were the reasons he’d held his tongue up till now. Sympathy for the victims and hatred for evil ignited his mind and will and channeled those emotions into energy. That power now reached its limits.

“You cut down the innocent, those forging new paths to the future. That isn’t

enough? So you torture them to death and make them accomplices to their own murders. You won't get away with it, Rebi Ra. My name is Kyoya Izayoi, and you have made yourself my first true enemy."

His voice rang out loud and clear. His languid eyes blazed with a fierce light, piercing the Hell Eye. The Sorcerer instinctively covered his face with his hands and flinched. The rage soon suffused his features again.

"Don't be so impertinent! You can do nothing with your hands and feet constrained. Boy, what makes you think you can escape?"

"Because I can."

"Nonsense!"

"Then feast your eyes on the *nenpo* of Kyoya Izayoi!"

The sound of grating metal echoed around the room. The shackles and manacles fell to the floor. Just as mysteriously, the bolts and clasps of the restraints were still engaged. Their hold had been broken by the mysterious and magical powers of *nenpo*.

Fear and consternation rose plainly to the Sorcerer's face. He roared, "Get him! Tear him to pieces!"

The pale, soulless hands of the undead converged on Kyoya from all directions, aiming at the base of his throat. Then came a *whoosh* of wind.

The Sorcerer goggled. The undead closest to Kyoya collapsed in a pile of lifeless bones and flesh. A moment later, that pile disintegrated into dust and evaporated like a desert dew.

Bending, Kyoya had plucked Asura off the floor and in the same movement delivered the sweeping blow that released their bodies from the Sorcerer's spell, and together with their souls sent them to sleep the sleep of the dead.

Asura hummed through the air several more times, until not a zombie was left in the room. Kyoya settled into a sword-high stance and approached the Sorcerer. "The goal was to grab you and haul your ass back to Master Rai. Either way's fine. One way or another—bring it on. But I gotta tell you, I'm kinda pissed right now, so I can't guarantee your well being."

“Idiot. That is my line.”

The Sorcerer slowly drew his own sword and thrust it in front of him, while reaching out his other hand in the opposite direction to maintain his balance, the stance of a classically-trained fencer.

“Wow, you’ve got some moves on you,” Kyoya exclaimed.

An altogether different kind of energy poured from the tip of the blade. Kyoya sensed his body cooling, the Sorcerer’s figure growing darker and farther away.

“And not surprisingly,” said the Sorcerer. “There is that certain thrill in casting the world into chaos all by oneself.” His scornful voice echoed like distant thunder. “This is the Devil Sword. Seven thousand years ago, a blacksmith in ancient Egypt offered it up to the Demon Realm. Since then, it has removed the heads of tens of thousands, absorbing their blood and becoming the Devil Sword. The same sword that ended the lives of those corpses. When the malice of the murdered combines with my own magical powers, that wooden sword of yours might as well be a toothpick.”

Though even as he spoke, the face and hands of the Sorcerer glistened with sweat. The *nen* erupting from the tip of Asura doused him with a numbing cold shower, struggling to contain the might of the Devil Sword.

The Sorcerer couldn’t help but mutter to himself, “I should expect no less from the son of Genichiro Izayoi—the fact alone that he attempts to take us all on by himself.”

Wood and steel—the forces of *nen* pouring from the two swords were evenly matched. Neither of the two silhouettes moved, each astonished by the power of his opponent.

“*Haa!*” With a wild shout, Kyoya broke the stalemate. He closed the distance between them in a sudden burst, thrusting with lightning speed as he moved forward.

The Sorcerer barely parried with the Devil Sword. Wood and steel met, white light and ink-black darkness pouring out of the junction. In the competing manifestations of Asura and the Devil Sword, the battle between the two psychic warriors took on a physical dimension, light erasing dark, dark swallowing up

light.

Retreating in the face of Kyoya's advance, the Sorcerer swept the Devil Sword sideways, meeting Asura with a dull thud. Good clashed with evil, their leveled gazes meeting as their swords crossed, with all their might the one steeling himself against the other.

The Sorcerer was the same age as Kyoya's father, so he must be more than sixty years old. He was proving to be amazingly strong. And yet Kyoya slowly pushed him back. The Sorcerer had also practiced yoga from a young age, but youth had advantages that age and experience couldn't match.

"Look at this, boy."

The Sorcerer's eyeless eyes flashed with crimson fire that would steal the will from any person caught in its line of sight. The spirit-sucking powers of the Hell Eye, ensnaring not only the will of the mind but the will to live itself, turning an opponent into a temporary invalid.

Kyoya didn't budge. The warm *nen* rising from Asura's hilt permeated his body, turning him into a divine messenger penetrating the darkness. The demon light of the Hell Eye quickly faded, as if staring into the rays of the sun.

Keep it coming, Dad! With a combination of physical strength and personal conviction, he steadily pushed the Sorcerer back, delivering the killing blow at an angle with an inescapable quickness as he lurched off balance. And yet—

"Damn!" Kyoya looked up in astonishment.

Asura had severed only the black mantle. The Sorcerer soared ten feet above him and came to a halt—the secret art of yoga levitation. The most eminent scientists of the Federation barely comprehended the first thing about the science of anti-gravity flight, and he had made it his own.

As Kyoya ground his teeth, the Sorcerer looked down on him and laughed. But there was a rather strangled quality to his mirth. Kyoya's attack had been that furious. The moment its force struck him and he sensed defeat, he'd made ready to run. That move saved his life.

"Luck was on your side, boy. You'll have to die another day. Or is that all you've got?"

The thin figure in a black shirt and trousers slipped toward the exits. The door was right before his eyes.

“Shit! You’re not getting away!” came Kyoya’s voice, stamping his foot on the ground.

A fearsome fighter but still a child. Casting a last condescending glance, the Sorcerer turned around just as Kyoya pushed off that foot into the air.

Kyoya’s other martial art was Shorin Kenpo, the art that turned his limbs into weapons of self-defense. The flying kick was one such technique. A talented practitioner of Shorin Kenpo could jump almost five feet without a running start. Kyoya could clear more than six.

Adding a running start brought him soaring through the air right at the Sorcerer’s head. The shout was more a psychological trick to make him freeze in his tracks.

“All the misery of the people you killed—I’m giving it back to you with interest!”

Without time to deflect the blow, Asura swung in a descending arc and slammed down on his shoulders. The sound of breaking bones. The Sorcerer crashed onto the concrete from a height of ten feet.

Kyoya alighted next to him with hardly a sound, like a cat with all of its nine lives still intact.

The Sorcerer sprawled on the ground moaning. He seemed to have split his head open on contact. The black blood stained the floor. That he still held onto the Devil Sword was a credit more to sheer tenacity.

“Crap. I suppose I’d better haul him off to Section Chief Yamashina before he bleeds to death.”

He sensed the end game while still in the air. The hatred and blood lust faded away. Kyoya moved swiftly toward the Sorcerer’s prone form.

With a groaning roar, a dirty dark brown whirlwind blasted through the open door. Kyoya leapt to the side. Detecting an evil miasma in the wind, his honed reflexes reacted. He corrected his posture and made Asura ready.

A cloud of dust. Realizing its initial attack failed, it swung around. Planting itself between Kyoya and the Sorcerer, the cloud assumed a human form.

“Are you the enemy the Sorcerer speaks of?” asked Doki.

“I guess so. I’m Kyoya Izayoi. You must be one of his monster bodyguards. Fire, water or earth? If I were you, I’d hurry on back to hell. Mind your manners and I’ll maybe even chant you a sutra and send you to heaven.”

“Impudence! *You’re* the one who trespassed into *my* world.” The Sorcerer got unsteadily to his feet, his voice infused with ferocity. “You arrived just in time, Doki. This boy transformed himself into the sacrificial victim.”

“Indeed. When the contracts of the previously slain souls suddenly burst into flames, I ran straight over here. I appear to have arrived in the nick of time. Leave this in my hands and depart.”

The Sorcerer tottered down the hallway. Kyoya didn’t move as he faded out of sight. He knew that if he flicked his eyes away from the demon in front of him for even a moment, he’d be on the receiving end of a fatal blow. The battle would be settled in a flash.

Doki’s form dissolved into a mist. The brown dust whirled straight at him. His magical mud inferno. The dust surrounded Kyoya. But there was a moment before it transformed into the crushing planetary crust of earth around him. There was, after all, nowhere for him to dodge his fate this time.

A fraction of a second before the gale contacted his body, Kyoya reflexively raised Asura high overhead and sharply brought it down. Where the invisible line drawn by Asura met the encircling whirlwind, it divided in two. As Kyoya completed the swing and stood there motionless for a second, it roared past him on either side.

And fused together behind him, once again assuming human shape. Though this time, it was something other than human in appearance. Something not of this world, the true form of a disgusting demon. Kyoya spun around to meet its renewed attack.

Like a gurgling storm sewer, the death agonies reverberated through the room.

Doki’s inconceivable shape split vertically from its head down, looking like

maggots spilling out of an overripe persimmon, and in a blink self-annihilated. The blow from Asura had produced a line of unparalleled force rising from the *nen* blade. It cleaved the enemy in two, such that regeneration was impossible.

Kyoya sank to his knees. *There goes one.* That was Doki, and it was no walk in the park.

The *nenpo* necessary to face off against such formidable enemies really did demand the utmost in mental concentration.

Even removing the shackles and manacles required the equivalent to ten megatons of magical energy, according to the Sorcerer. There was no telling what concentrations of psychic energy had been expended in the effort.

Breathing heavily, Kyoya again turned his attention toward the gloom-wrapped exits. He sensed nothing of the Sorcerer's presence. "So he scampered away, eh? I can't stop thinking about that other girl. I'd better start looking."

Concern strained his features. The perfect opportunity had fallen into his hands and he'd let the Sorcerer slip through his fingers. His foes wouldn't likely let themselves be caught flat-footed the next time. They knew his limits and would come at him with new strategies. He had to ferret out the Sorcerer's den in three days, dispatch the other two demon bodyguards, eradicate the spell, and free the president.

The darkness began to lighten in the direction of the exits. Even the morning eventually visited Demon City. Holding tightly onto Asura, Kyoya made his way down the hallway.

Part Five

The Sorcerer lay on a bed in a room in the large underground plaza that constituted his secret headquarters.

“The time has come to use *that*,” he said. He indicated the apparatus at the back of the room, sitting in the darkness. The silent Suiki and Kaki looked down at him. “I will die before long. You understand how to proceed?”

The two demon sprites nodded. Though the master who had summoned them was dying, they showed not the slightest emotion. The Sorcerer was a haggard frame of skin and bones. His face resembled a skull. The Hell Eye had lost its light, and the circles under his eyes were creased with dark lines.

He was already wearing a death mask. His head and right shoulder were wrapped with bandages. But what threatened to extinguish the flame of his life wasn't so much the visible injuries delivered by Kyoya's sword.

He had offered up his soul to the Demon Realm and taken his accursed powers as collateral. The blow delivered by Kyoya—imbued with the psychic energies of himself and his father, Genichiro—had shattered that reservoir of evil energy.

Medically speaking, his collarbone and shoulder blade were broken. However, for the Sorcerer, the unsalvageable wellspring of his being had been crushed in a death-dealing stroke.

After barely making it back to the safe house, keenly aware of his own mortality, he had called the two demons to his bedside. And though balanced now on the verge of death, not the slightest concession of defeat could be seen in his manner or his mien.

The Sorcerer sat up. “Before I die, you must deliver one more girl to the Demon Realm. Bring her here.”

Kaki disappeared into the hallway and returned with Sayaka. She'd been attacked by a two-headed dog, had tussled with gangbanger cyborgs, and been kidnapped by demons—a normal girl would have swooned at the sight of any one of these events—and yet the aura of her innocent beauty hadn't dimmed in the least. The eyes looking down at the Sorcerer brimmed with life.

Rather, it was the Sorcerer who was startled by the presence of such grace and beauty. He'd been in the Takada no Baba hideout when Doki and Suiki had brought her here. This was the first time they'd met.

“Hoh. What a fine young woman, draped in an aura of refinement most inappropriate to this place.”

“So you are the Sorcerer Rebi Ra,” Sayaka quietly stated. “You can run but you cannot hide. Send these creatures back to the Demon Realm and remove the curse on my father.”

The expression on the Sorcerer's face stiffened. “Your father? What is your name?”

“Sayaka.”

“Ah, but of course. President Rama's daughter. Such idealistic sentiments do agree with you. You're the image of your father, I hear, brought up like a nun, unsullied by the sinful world.”

“Your flatteries will avail you nothing. Undo your spells.”

“Ha. Make all the scary faces you want. I will die in any case.”

“What?”

“You know him, this boy Kyoya Izayoi? The boy knight has performed as expected, though he does owe half of his powers to his father. He did well dealing me this fatal wound.”

Surrounded by such fearsome enemies, bathed in an atmosphere of loathing and malice, Sayaka's eyes brimmed with tears. “Then he came after all! My father—the world—may yet be saved.”

“That will never happen!” shouted the Sorcerer, a cry that would freeze blood in the veins. Sayaka quavered despite herself. It was clear to her that even

hovering on the edge of his own extinction, the Sorcerer was fully convinced that his plans would eventually triumph.

His dour words continued. “I will die, but I will return, though it will take me time to walk again. Should that boy ferret us out during that time, the situation could prove dire.”

The tone of his voice changed. His eyes glided over every line of Sayaka’s body. “Are you fond of that boy? Your attitude reveals all. But that could prove his Achilles’ heel. Why did you come to Shinjuku on your own? You should have left the job to him.”

Seized by a fearful premonition, Sayaka tried to retreat. The two demons on her right and left grabbed her arms.

“Please let go! Don’t make things worse for yourselves than they already are!” She squirmed and shouted but they weren’t about to set her free.

“Calm down. I’ll be sure to arrange a meeting between you and your boyfriend.”

“Do you know where Kyoya-san is right now?”

“No. You shall lead us to him.”

“I do not know where he is. Coming to this city was my own idea.”

“You do not need to know. Your shadow knows.”

“My shadow?”

“A shadow is not a simple, two-dimensional representation of the self. The shadow knows you down to your unconscious thoughts. Excuse me for seeking your help in eradicating your lover, but I will have it.”

“Stop this! Let go of me!”

The Sorcerer seized the Devil Sword leaning against the bed and hurled it at Sayaka’s shadow. With a dull thud, the accursed blade sank into the concrete in the vicinity of her throat. The steel shaft quivered back and forth. That was all he did, but Sayaka felt the stab of pain as if the sword had pierced her own flesh. She fainted dead away, the demon sprites still grasping her arms.

The Sorcerer jerked his chin. The demons nodded and dragged Sayaka a step backwards. He gazed at her feet, his lips twisting into a gruesome smile that communicated an inarticulate emotion somewhere between pain and joy.

“We can do it, steal her shadow.”

The shadow stretching a foot away from Sayaka’s feet across the bed remained entwined around the Devil Sword.

“But isn’t she meant for the altar?” asked Kaki.

The Sorcerer shook his head. “No. I have a more important role for her. Eliminating that boy would be difficult even combining the strengths of all three of us.”

“With all due respect—”

“Listen. Half of the power suffusing that wooden sword belongs to his father. Steal the sword, and he is still an untested youngster. Your powers alone would be sufficient to overcome him. We shall proceed as follows—”

As the two demons held onto Sayaka, with his dying breaths the Sorcerer laid out the details of his plan. When he was done, Suika took Sayaka away.

The Sorcerer lay back down on the bed. Kaki slowly pushed the bed toward the back of the room. The creaking of the wheels echoed hollowly through the dark world, mingling with his final words, muttered in the unconstrained bitterness and malice of his death throes.

“You watch, son of Izayoi, I will soon return.”

With that, his voice and his labored breaths died away. The Sorcerer expired. This should have been victory. In that moment, in America, the marks of the curse should have vanished from President Rama’s neck. The machinations of the Demon Realm should have come to a standstill.

And yet, Kaki betrayed not the slightest sign of consternation. In the gloom ahead appeared the black altar, engraved with strange and mysterious shapes. Racks full of electronic equipment were clustered around it.

Kaki parked the bed next to the altar, produced a metal card seemingly out of thin air, and inserted it into the nearby medical computer. The panel lit up and

the machines sprang to life. From the surrounding speakers flowed the rhythmic patterns of synthesized speech. The incantations of the Demon Realm, sounding more like rites for the dead than conjuring up demonic spells.

A faint light oozed from the Sorcerer's body, rising upward out of the corpse as if exorcized by the incantations. The soul of the Sorcerer, in human form. Is this what he meant by "return"? But there was no calling this soul back into the vessel.

The human-shaped soul looked at Kaki and grinned. Though it had no eyes, mouth or nose, the expression was unmistakable. It leapt onto the altar and lay down.

At the same time, the incantations ceased. Kaki retreated. Responding to instructions from the computer, several of the electronic devices positioned themselves around the altar. One was equipped with ultrasonic scalpels and suturing lasers, the others consisted of parts cabinets and industrial construction robots repurposed for micro-scale assembly work.

Every inch of them—from the scalpels to the assembly arms, from the frames down to the screws—were etched with spells. A surgical procedure combining the powers of magic and electrical engineering would surely commence next. But to what end? And what was the meaning of the confident smile that rose simultaneously to the faces of both the body and the soul?

"Breakfast," the maître d' and owner of the hotel announced gruffly. Without knocking, he opened the door and stepped into the room. He was holding a plastic tray in his hands and had a cheap folded map under his arm.

"Breakfast" meant reconstituted black market MREs that would make a dog think twice. "What's with this slop?" Kyoya grumbled, setting the tray on the lumpy, hard mattress. "One night for a hundred credits and this is how you treat your guests?"

He'd crashed at the place the night before, after duking it out with the Sorcerer. It'd been the only hotel open. He'd only woken up a few minutes before. That he didn't feel any of the wear and tear was only thanks to his youth.

"Don't like it, don't eat it, all the same to me. I'm sure somebody else here

would like seconds. It still goes on the bill.” He went to pick it up again.

“Got it. Damned Scrooge.” Kyoya snatched the tray back from him. He should have packed his own. This was Shinjuku, after all.

“Yeah, so shut up and eat. Some kid comes flying in here at the crack of dawn, takes the best room I got, and sleeps practically till noon—you can keep the bitching and moaning to yourself. It’s past eleven, you know. You should be grateful I even took your money in the first place.”

“Got it, okay? Anyway, what the hell is that?” Munching on some stale synthetic protein wafers, Kyoya nodded his chin at the window.

Six feet outside the window, the thing floated in the air. It had an oval shape and was about five yards wide, and was the color of the sunset. It had depth as well as width, and the red tint grew more intense deeper in. The surrounding edges trembled all over. The combination really did bring to mind the image of a ravenous mouth.

“No idea.” The owner shook his bald head. “It’s been there since the Devil Quake. According to the professors, it’s twisting space caused by the energy of the Devil Quake. A pan-dimensional void, whatever that is. It’ll swallow up whatever you throw at it. Everybody calls it the coin purse. Leave it alone and it don’t do nothing. Nothing to worry about.”

“Well, it’s weirding me out,” said Kyoya, glaring at the dusky red lips. “Glad it didn’t eat me while I was sleeping. Whatever. You bring me what I asked for?”

“Here you go.” The owner tossed the map of Shinjuku onto the bed. “There’s a needle and thread on the tray. Comes to two hundred credits.”

“Put it on my tab,” Kyoya said, untangling the needle and the strong polymer thread. “I’ll pay when I check out.”

That morning when he woke up, he’d discovered that the cuffs of his trainer jacket were shredded. The Sorcerer must have done the damage the night before with his Devil Sword. Luckily, he’d missed his arms.

“Fine with me,” the owner nodded courteously. Then he smiled more cunningly. “That map is from before the Devil Quake. A lot’s the same, but buildings have collapsed and streets are blocked. There are bound to be plenty

of errors in the fine details. And there's no way to grasp the *feel* of the streets just from the map alone. I got no other guests for now and nothing on my plate, so how about a guided tour? Thirty credits an hour."

"Greedy bastard," Kyoya steamed as he got to his feet. "Trying to turn a profit every chance you get. Weren't you just threatening to give away my breakfast?" But he bridled his temper. He didn't have any time to spare ferreting out the Sorcerer's hideout, not to mention wandering around asking strangers for directions. Stirring the pot in the wrong part of town could prove deadly.

Time may be money, but money wouldn't buy back the lost time.

The owner read the look on his face and said with a mean little laugh, "Heh. I appreciate it. So where do you want to go?"

He dragged a rickety old stool from a corner of the room and sat down across from Kyoya. The room was a good fifteen by twenty feet, but contained almost no furniture.

"First of all, where is this hotel located?"

The owner pointed at a spot on the big map.

"What? Waseda University College of Engineering? So this used to be a school, eh? I thought it was a little odd, big rooms with nothing in 'em. And you got two entrances and exits, no shower or sink. A classroom, then." Kyoya shrugged. "Next, where exactly is the most dangerous part of town?"

He didn't come right out and ask about where the monsters and zombies liked to hang out. On the other hand, beating around the bush was a pain.

"That'd be Kabuki-cho." The owner added with a funny grin, "Naw, that'd probably be here."

He planted his finger on one block in the heart of Shinjuku, labeled "New City Center." Kyoya was familiar with it. Several hundred yards from the west entrance to Shinjuku station was, first and foremost, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex, followed by the Keio Plaza Hotel, the Mitsui Building, the Sumitomo Building, a forest of skyscrapers all over forty stories and three hundred feet high.

And behind them, the expansive two hundred acres of Shinjuku's Chuo Park.

The buildings had survived the Devil Quake, which had the contradictory effect of accentuating all the fears associated with the "big one."

"Why here? The monsters come out at night?" Kyoya asked in as leading a manner as he could muster.

The owner shook his head. "Dunno. Only that anybody who goes in here don't come out again. Five years ago, twenty damned-strong esper yakuza and an android bodyguard armed to the teeth went in there on an expedition. Since then, nobody's set foot anywhere near the place. It's surrounded by a fence to keep interlopers away, but now and then some idiot sightseer ignores it and is never seen or heard from again."

"Dead, or something else?" Kyoya drew his forefinger across his neck.

"Hard to tell. There are those who say that on foggy nights you can hear the weeping and wailing of dozens, and see bunches of white shadows wandering around in rags. Yeah, and now and then, a loud sound like from one of those big Harleys."

"A motorcycle? Anything sporting such an old-fashioned engine should have been carted off to the scrap heap a decade ago."

"Don't make any sense to me, neither. Stories and rumors, you know."

Kyoya cocked his head to the side. It sounded like the perfect place for the Sorcerer and his ilk to hide, but this bike business had him stumped. Well, he'd figure it out when he saw it for himself.

"What about around Kabuki-cho?"

"Outlaw territory. It's where the scrapped space cyborgs, black market espers, gangbangers and other ne'er-do-wells hang out. With all the ruins and mountains of rubbish, there are plenty of places to hide. When it comes to the shops and money exchanges, it's share and share alike, even among rivals. You can have the blackest heart, but if you got money, you can live easy."

"And if you don't?"

"Then say your goodbyes and boogie on back to the safety zones." The owner

traced the red borders of Shinjuku Ward with his finger. “From the Ochiai region to West Waseda, Yamabukicho—here is where the law-abiding types congregate. Road kill for the criminal vultures. Those cyborgs and androids have to keep their nuclear batteries charged. Don’t matter much if you got possessed by one of those Martian parasites, you still got to put food in your mouth. Though lately those in the safety zones have been arming themselves but good, so it’s not the easy pickings it used to be.”

He thought about it for a moment and added, “If you’re looking for a big score, take a trip to the outside world. You got types here that could trash a commando police armored vehicle with one hand, that could pass through the vault walls of the Bank of Tokyo using osmosis, could turn themselves into the character in a painting and steal into any art museum—tricks like that are a piece of cake to them. Could start a small war if they all freaked out together. Is it true there are pols out there thinking of arming the opposing sides with tactical nukes, that whole mutually-assured destruction thing?”

Kyoya shrugged in a way that said he didn’t know. He had expected as much. A city where folks like them prowled the streets was a good excuse to be somewhere else. But he had to venture forth.

“The Yotsuya neighborhood—Samoncho, Sugacho, Daikyocho—what about them?”

“There’s a bioengineering laboratory near the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya. Word is they had a whole ton of computers there running big experiments using recombinant DNA. The building was flattened during the quake. Nobody knows exactly what happened after that, but in three months, huge two-headed dogs were showing up, along with snakes six-hundred feet long. The data from sequencing storage units must have mixed slap-dash with samples from the gene-splicing machines, giving birth to all kinds of weird monsters. You got pythons that could swallow a compact car. Anybody with half a brain keeps his distance. What I’ve heard is, the mutant freaks got the ruins of the Ministry of Defense building and Shinjuku Gardens to themselves.”

“Condos for monsters, eh. That’s Shinjuku for you.”

Kyoya scratched his head. The options at this juncture were entirely unclear.

As strange as New City Center and Kabuki-cho sounded, it seemed like pretty much anywhere else in this city could boast the same. He hardly knew where to begin.

“Might as well head toward Kabuki-cho. What’s the best route?”

The owner again planted his finger on the map and grinned. “If you follow this map, you’ll end up at the Shin-Okubo market in twenty minutes. You can catch a taxi there. But watch your step. It’s not as bad as Kabuki-cho, but shady types congregate there. A couple of street gangs are fighting for control of the market turf. There’s no telling when it will break out into all-out war.”

“Lunar Colony earthlight cultured mushrooms. Good for whatever ails you. First come, first served.”

“All-natural beef, straight off the boat from Australia. The real thing. Look, you can see the blood. Put some pep in an old man’s step.”

“A thousand cases of macromolecule mineral drinks, FDA approved. Thirty percent off. A bargain!”

The energetic voices of the pitch men spilled across the market occupying the grounds of the old JR Shin-Okubo station plaza. There were dozens of markets in Shinjuku, large and small. The ones in Wakamatsu in the middle of the ward and in the northwest on the high street in Nakaochiai were particularly big and varied in their offerings. But they paled in comparison to here.

The rubble left behind by the buildings brought down by the Devil Quake had been cleared away. Garishly painted prefab shops were packed into a three-hundred yard arc around the original station plaza. Along the narrow streets radiating outwards, “normal” folk mingled and jostled alongside criminals, “fallen” men and women, cyborgs and espers, making for an impressive spectacle.

In a single day, the market cleared up to two thousand tons of merchandise. A good half of the hundred thousand some-odd residents of Shinjuku Ward—Demon City—owed their existence to this market.

“Dardick M7 heater, fresh off a Federation Space Forces surplus sale. Five round magazine. Two thousand credits.”

“Corrosive type-13 guns. Can reduce a mobile police search-and-destroy robot to scrap. Ten thousand credits.”

Damned dangerous items advertised by barkers with no inclination to adopt a more subtle sales spiel. That was hardly the end of it. Rusty old laser weapons, high pressure “whirlwind” scythes that could slice through steel as well as flesh and bone. Tornado “weather bombs” as big as a man’s thumb that sucked up everything within a quarter mile.

If security officials from the outside world could observe what was going on, they’d be lining up shoulder to shoulder and crowding into the tiny shops like dogs after fresh meat.

And not just the established shops. In the shadows, dealers with grim expressions waited for moneyed prospects to walk by. They’d softly sidle up to a client and whisper, “The latest Jekyll and Hyde morphing drugs, bargain-basement prices, ninety-nine percent pure. Take the wimpiest coward who wouldn’t hurt a fly, and he’ll kill every one out of ten—out of five—people he met without raising an eyebrow. A shot from a magnum rifle wouldn’t scratch ’em when they’re fully dosed.”

Such activities were little different than dealings in the narcotics trade. And, legally speaking, no different than the business of mercenaries and contract killers that was conducted away from the station, over towards Meiji Avenue in the direction of the former Zenryuji Temple, where an impressive exhibition could be found.

A “murmuring mosquito” could be programmed to steal into the ear of a victim and transmit an autosuggestion loop into the brain on high frequency waves, leading to an apparently impulsive suicide. Depending on how deeply embedded the thought was, murders could be carried out in almost undetectable ways.

Convince a man walking down the sidewalk—for example—that he was on the roof of a tall building. Told to throw himself off, the victim would fall a few feet onto the ground, and yet would die instantly. A subsequent autopsy would reveal the kind of internal damage that only came after falling from a great height.

Other devices and specialized drugs were for sale there, including those that triggered mutations at the cellular level and caused the imbiber to exhibit the characteristics of a tiger or wolf or eagle.

Coat the walls of a room or home with “inorganic appetite accelerator” paint, and the building would literally consume its inhabitants. Stab a victim with a “time delay” knife, and the effects would not manifest themselves until several hours later.

While buyers and sellers conversed conspiratorially together, the loud hustle and bustle on the street went on uninterrupted. A few stalls over, someone shouted, “Thief!” Guns were grabbed, laser light flashed, and a snatch and grab cyborg burst into flames. A hearse showed up a few minutes later, seized the still-smoldering corpse with a remote control arm and hauled it off to a special-purpose crematorium.

The briefly-interrupted flow of human traffic went back to normal as if nothing had happened. Perhaps this one street symbolized the nature of Demon City better than any other.

Sayaka Rama headed down a street like that one, away from the station and towards Meiji Avenue, about the time that Kyoya woke up.

As the demon sprites were not accompanying her, it might seem at first that she had escaped. But no. Her pretty face was as devoid of human emotion as a doll. She walked in a similarly stiff manner. A passerby who glanced down at her feet would surely look twice and run away.

For the slender shadow falling on the ground was not actually connected to her. It was walking along by itself a good foot behind her.

When Sayaka stumbled, so did the shadow. But it quickly found its footing and kept on going. And Sayaka herself straightened in a peculiar manner, as if yanked to her feet by invisible strings, walking along in fits and starts like a toy soldier.

The shadow controlled the body that cast it. “Shadowmancy,” it was called.

“Hold on a second, little lady.”

In another twenty yards, the street intersected with Meiji Avenue. A number of

silhouettes stood in her way blocking the path. One of them was considerably more massive than the rest, wearing silvery Space Forces combat fatigues, and filling every spare inch of it. A woman.

Yoshiko Kokonoe, boss of the “Hippopotamus Group,” one the gangs aiming for control of the street markets.

She had a puffy face like a muffin, slathered with rouge—though it looked more like paint splashed across the side of a barn—narrow eyes, a mouth bent into a frown, and a bent disposition to match. Her heft and girth notwithstanding, it was said she preferred a good fight and a side helping of torture over any meal.

She was the kind of creature mothers warned their children about when they disobeyed. Certainly no child would venture within screaming distance of her. This woman might well symbolize Demon City’s criminal element better than any other.

Sensing that Sayaka was the polar opposite of everything she represented, she went out of her way to pick a fight with her. Sayaka was the personification of the festering itch that every yakuza was born to scratch.

“Well, miss, you’re certainly not from around here. What are you doing here? Spying on us? And let me remind you, if I don’t get a straight answer, it won’t be pretty.”

A frame the size of a small mountain backed up her threats, but Sayaka just stood there with blank eyes. The separation of her body and shadow had left her true self in a trance-like state, making her nothing more than a marionette manipulated by the commands of the shadow itself.

Thinking she was being ignored, Yoshiko filled with a terrifying light. “Hoh. A plain Jane like me isn’t worth talking to, eh? God gives a girl a nice-looking face and suddenly she’s too good for the rest of us? Maybe I’d like a piece of that face too.”

They whisked Sayaka away to a large room in the ruins. Shipping containers and heaps of cardboard boxes were piled up on the concrete floor. Ten yards further on, water pipes and faucets poked haphazardly out of the floor. It had once been part of a distribution warehouse.

“Bitch!” Yoshiko barked, and went to smack Sayaka across the face. With two hundred pounds of weight behind it, the blow would have sent a normal man flying and broken his jaw to boot.

Sayaka pivoted her lithe body out of the way and the big mass of fat crashed off balance to the ground. The difference in speed and agility between them was like a hippo charging a doe.

“Ow, dammit!” Yoshiko got to her feet, a look of mad fury on her face. It had to hurt doubly bad being shown up by an amateur in front of her lackeys. From the yakuza godfather down to the lowliest street punk, they feared nothing more than ridicule.

She roared, “Teach that girl some manners!”

“No need to say so, Boss!” On her command, the hoodlums rushed her, shouting, “Get the bitch!”

They took two steps and sank down into the ground. With a collective scream and a water-like splash, they were swallowed up by the floor. Except the “water” that struck Yoshiko in the face was the color of concrete.

Mingling with the ear-piercing screams was the sound of tearing flesh and crunching bone. Yoshiko’s gaze was drawn toward the faucets. Though no one had turned the spigots, water started pouring out of the pipes, turning from pale pink to blood itself.

“M-monster!” Her thick, alto voice now screeched like tearing metal. With a velocity that belied her mass, she disappeared into the alleys of the market.

Sayaka was left there by herself. “What a bunch of annoying interlopers,” the water faucet gurgled. “But all said, a fine meal. Go with your shadow. Your true enemy awaits.”

Ten minutes later, Sayaka stood beneath a neon sign that read, “Waseda Hotel.”

“Here?” The ground beneath her feet wavered like a lowlying mist. The demon’s voice wafted up. “Go in. You remember the plan?”

Led by her shadow, Sayaka entered the hotel—née, the Waseda University Department of Science and Engineering. It was the only wing of the school that

remained. The rest had been reduced to towering piles of steel and concrete scattered here and there on the expansive campus.

The first floor was the lobby. Immediately to the left, the owner leaned back in a chair behind the crudely constructed counter, snoring.

The shadow proceeded to the second floor. It stopped in a corner of the hallway, in front of Kyoya's room. The voice again came at her feet. "I'll take this for now. It may come in useful at some point."

A pale hand reached up from the floor and took hold of the edge of the shadow, in a blink rolling it up like a sheet of paper. And then sucked back into the floor.

Making sure it was gone, Sayaka knocked on the door.

"It's open."

In reaction to Kyoya's voice, her expression didn't change in the slightest. She pushed open the door.

Kyoya was sitting on the bed, just having put on his shoes. He jumped to his feet, startled by this unexpected visitor.

"You are—definitely Sayaka. What are you doing here? A place like this? And how did you know I was here?"

"I wanted to see you. I thought I could help." Sayaka's hollow eyes didn't look at Kyoya, but at Asura leaning against the bed. "I am so tired. Could I lie down?"

"Ah—um—sure. Come over here."

Not waiting for Kyoya to answer, Sayaka approached the bed and grabbed Asura. Her whole body was pierced as if by a red-hot blade. Then she screamed as the psychic power stored in the sword struck hard at the demon spirit possessing her.

But before collapsing to the floor, Sayaka managed to muster enough strength to hurl Asura toward the nearby window. With the sound of shattering glass, the squirming pan-dimensional lips of the weird creature floating in the air swallowed it up.

“What are you doing?!”

Kyoya ran toward the window and stopped. An eerie aura suffused the room. The enemy was already here.

They’d used Sayaka to steal Asura and then kill Kyoya. This was the Sorcerer’s plan. He hadn’t planned on Sayaka fainting as well. But Asura getting sucked into another dimension proved an equally happy accident.

Sayaka-san was the trap. Kyoya suppressed the rising tide of frustration and indignation, and cast his senses around the room. *But what to do now?*

He didn’t have time to think it through. The miasma filled the room. He raced over to Sayaka and scooped her up in his arms. The jostling soon awakened her. Perhaps because the shock from Asura had released her from the shadowmancy’s hypnotic trance, her eyes were clear and lucid.

“Ah, Kyoya-san. W-what am I doing here?”

“I’d like to ask you the same thing, considering that stunt you just pulled.”

Sayaka’s face clouded over. Her memories from before the shadowmancy were coming back. “The Sorcerer cast a spell on me. What did I do?”

“Nothing to me personally,” Kyoya said with a smile and a wink. “Don’t worry about it.” Taking her to task at this point would do little good.

“What are you doing?” the startled Sayaka asked. He abruptly crouched and drew a circle around them with his forefinger. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know. Something crawled under my feet. But no magical powers should be able to cross inside the circle.” Kyoya’s eyes shone with a fierce light. “Looks like I was right.”

Sayaka followed Kyoya’s gaze and exclaimed in surprise. The bed—the sheets and mattress—turned transparent, like jellyfish. The sheets tossed like the waves of the sea. The frame of the bed bobbed and twisted and started to dissolve.

Not only the bed. The chair lost its form and was sinking into the undulating floor. The window and curtains grew muddy and fused like warm taffy with the concrete wall. The entire room was melting away.

As Sayaka clung to him, Kyoya slipped the watch off her wrist. “The floors

and walls are a loss, but what about this?”

He threw the watch upwards. With a plopping sound, it sank into the ceiling. The splash burst “up” toward the floor and “fell back” to the ceiling, the ripples spreading outwards.

“So it’s reached the ceiling too. Not just the molecular composition, but gravity. That’s one hell of a monster.”

By then, except for the round section they were perched on, the rest of the room had turned into an ocean. The bed was sinking halfway through the floor. Squinting, Sayaka could see slender shadows flitting through the depths of the dark blue floor.

“Those are *fish*,” Sayaka said in a muffled voice.

“Demon City fish. Who knows what’s going to show up next.”

As if answering Kyoya, low laughter came from the other side of the room. “Exactly. I thought I’d show off my pets.”

The voice hadn’t died away before the surface of the “sea” welled up six feet in front of them. Breaking out of the cresting wave, a giant fish leapt into the air, silvery scales flashing in the light. With one bloodshot eye and spear-like fangs sprouting from its purple triangular mouth, it streaked over their heads like a fifteen-foot torpedo—barely missing as they ducked down—and landed in the “water” of the opposite wall.

A column of water rose “up,” parallel to the floor as the floor beneath their feet rocked like a small boat in a stormy ocean.

“At this rate, I’m going to get seasick before I get eaten,” Kyoya grumbled in an exasperated voice.

As she clung to him, her eyes drawn to the source of the outburst, Sayaka smiled. This girl too had nerves of steel that seemed utterly foreign to her countenance. Kyoya grinned broadly.

“What are you smiling about?” came the demon’s voice. “You killed Doki and the Sorcerer—but was that due to your own strength?”

“What? The Sorcerer is dead?” Kyoya forgot about the sea-tossed floor

beneath his feet and stood up. “So the president has recovered?”

“Never,” laughed the demon. “You merely *killed* the Sorcerer. You did not *annihilate* him. The curse shall not be undone, not so long as his soul remains intact.”

“What’s this guy blabbing about? Think I’m gonna let this pissy little liar yank my chain? Go to hell where you belong.”

“If you want to know the truth, then come to our lair and you will soon discover for yourself. But you won’t be getting out of here alive. You saw it yourself, my creature from the deep. Surrender to me or end up in its bowels. You had better prepare yourself.”

“Well, I’ve decided, and that’s a big no to both.”

“What are you saying?”

Kyoya shot back, “I’m saying you talk awful big for somebody afraid to show his face. Prepare myself for what? A miserable coward of a demon like you? When word gets out in the Demon Realm, you’ll be too embarrassed to show that lickspittle face of yours in public. C’mon, you and me, *mano-a-mano*. If you have the guts. Don’t you think it’s about time you pulled your own weight without running to papa?”

A long silence followed Kyoya’s trash-talking. And then the answer, shaking with white-hot anger. “You do have a mouth on you, boy. You’ll eat those words before I draw and quarter you.”

The shrouded face arose from the surface of the “sea,” followed by the body clothed in a monk’s habit.

“My name is Suiki. You want to face me. Here I am. Now what are you going to do about it?”

“What am *I* going to do about it?” Kyoya shrugged. And Sayaka laughed.

Suiki roared, “Don’t mess with me! I have yet to lift a finger. You’re as good as chum!”

The fish sprang at them from the wall on the left. They both ducked. With a spray of water it splashed into the floor less than a foot away, the dorsal fin

cutting a path to the wall on the right and up the wall to the ceiling, where it began leisurely turning in a wide circle. Attacking from directly above, it had the literal high ground.

Either end up in its mouth or abandon ship for this magical sea—the same fate dealt to the gangbangers at Yotsuya Sanchome station and the ruins of Shin-Okubo awaited them.

Kyoya grasped Sayaka around the waist and stood up. “Isn’t it about time we called it a day? I see you took my double-dog dare and showed your face.”

“Let’s not hear any more excuses. Without your wooden sword, what are you? What can a boy like you do when left to his own devices?”

“We’ll have to see, won’t we?”

The answer to that came from above, the fish springing down at them, mouth gaping wide.

“Gotta try harder than that, bugface!”

With his arm around Sayaka, Kyoya jumped into the air. With nothing to hold or stand on, launching an attack seemed impossible. But he commenced a series of aggressive moves, twisting out of the way of the fish falling at them like a cleaving glacier while delivering a mighty reverse kick to its back. Then he pursed his lips and aimed at Suiki.

A flash of silver, a long tail trailing behind, plunged deep into Suiki’s hood. With a tortured scream, Suiki bent backwards, clapping a hand over one eye.

“That’s some needlework *nenpo* for you.”

The needle and thread Kyoya had gotten from the hotel owner smashed into the demon’s eye. Kyoya had learned this needle-spitting technique from his father.

The two alighted on the original section of floor. The fish—its back crushed—disappeared midair. Even losing Asura, Kyoya possessed the psychic powers necessary to destroy these demonic underlings.

“Son of a bitch!”

Suiki flailed about on the surface of the sea. Spawned perhaps by the bitter

dregs of his magical powers, a fierce whirlwind spun out of nowhere. The gale caught up the piece of floor Kyoya and Sayaka were standing on, sending it fluttering to and fro like a leaf caught in a rough surf.

From the floor—that was now a sea—to the walls and up to the ceiling. Seeing flooring above his head, even Kyoya felt a cold chill down his spine. It was a bright afternoon fall day. Only this room was wracked by the surging dark waves of a magical sea.

“Ah, he’s changing!” cried Sayaka, pointing down at Suiki.

“His true form.”

Suiki’s appearance no longer conformed to a human shape. The shroud and habit fell away, revealing a thick writhing bundle of wet white tentacles rising from the floor. At first, there seemed to be dozens of strands. But soon there were hundreds, multiplying in wave after seething wave.

Deep within the dense forest of tentacles, the one crazed red eye flashed with hatred and loathing as it fixed Kyoya in its gaze. “Don’t run away. I will reduce you and this whole house to driftwood.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, jerkwad.”

Kyoya once again wrapped his arm around Sayaka’s waist. He shifted their little round “boat” around like a surfboard and approached the window. Drenched in the froth from the floor and ceiling, he said with a jerk of his chin, “This is our only hope.”

Sayaka looked in that direction and her face brightened. Obscured by the crashing waves, it was hard to make out, but there was a break in the vertical wall of water. Sunlight poured through the break. These were the remaining shards of glass in the window Sayaka had thrown Asura through.

“No matter how strong, monsters can be wounded. Otherwise, he would have drawn us into his grasp by now. We can escape on the strength of my *nen* alone. Together, now.”

“Yes.”

The round piece of floor came alongside the break in the wall. They jumped

like a pair of divers and plunged head first through the soaring seas. A brief shock of cold, and a moment later they were flying through sunlit space beneath a golden sun. They flipped over and around, and landed on the hard earth.

Thanks to their training in Shorin Kenpo and Aikido, they landed without suffering the full impact of the fall.

Kyoya helped Sayaka to her feet. “I don’t think he’ll be coming after us right away, not with a wound like that. But there’s another of them out there, and he could be just around the corner for all we know. We’d better find some cover.” He glanced back at the hotel. “Holy cow,” he exclaimed.

“Wow.”

In this case, perhaps it wasn’t entirely appropriate to be impressed by the sight, but it was a staggering spectacle. The whole hotel had turned semi-transparent, quivering and swaying like a massive jellyfish, as it disintegrated and dissolved. Having let the person who wrecked his eye slip through his fingers, Suiki directed his demonic rage against the building instead. A good thing that Kyoya had been the only boarder.

The owner came crawling out of the entranceway, steam rising from his bald head. He looked like he’d seen a ghost. This time he pretty much had.

“It ain’t much, but unfortunately it looks like I’m gonna have to skip out on the bill.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

He took Sayaka by the arm and hurried through the front gate.

Part Six

Kyoya deliberately headed down one of the more twisting alleyways.

After walking for fifteen minutes and seeing no one in sight, they ducked into the ruins of a building. With a collapsed stone wall between them, they undressed and spread their clothes to dry. They hadn't noticed back in the room, their nerves on edge, but they were soaked to the skin.

Waiting for the sun to do its work, they caught each other up on the details of what had gone on until they met.

What drew Kyoya's attention in particular was Sayaka's account of the Sorcerer's dying words.

"So even if dies, he's coming back? That last monster said something similar. So I guess we can expect him to turn up in a different form?"

Sayaka poked her head around the wall and said in a concerned voice, "Seems so, seeing that the curse on my father still hasn't been lifted."

This caught the half-dressed Kyoya off guard, but as she was still an innocent when it came to such things, he let it drop. "Yeah. Unfortunately. One way or another, if he's not destroyed down to his soul, the spell stays in place. Check it out yourself—you still don't have a shadow."

On the other side of the wall, Sayaka let out a small scream.

"I noticed after we left the hotel. The Sorcerer's shadowmancy. Your shadow led you to me. But why would your shadow know stuff like that?"

Sayaka didn't know either. Though if he had perchance spied over the wall, despite the draft of unpleasantly cool autumn breeze, he would have seen Sayaka's cheeks flushing red hot. The Sorcerer said that she was in love with Kyoya.

“I don’t know. And why would I have come to your room?”

“Who knows,” Kyoya answered, playing dumb. No need to hit her over the head with the truth at this juncture. There was no telling how badly she’d take it. “Seeing that the Sorcerer cast this spell on you, it’s a safe bet that as long as it continues, so will the curse on your father.”

Facing the wall, bathed in the bright fall sunlight, the two sank into silence, Kyoya contemplating the battles to come without Asura, and Sayaka worrying about her ailing father.

“Well, nothing’s getting done just sitting here,” Kyoya said a long minute later, pulling on his still damp trainer. “First off, let’s figure a way to get you out of here.”

“Huh?”

Sayaka peeked around the wall, a confused expression on her face, exposing her white shoulders and the swell of her breasts rising out of her bra. Kyoya hastily looked the other way. On any other occasion, he would have leaned in for a better look. With her, though, it was somehow different.

“Obviously,” he said bluntly, “a dangerous place like this is no place for a woman like you to be on her own.”

And yet that bluntness seemed somehow moderated.

“I’m not on my own. You’re with me.”

“Save the humor. I’ve still got a job to do. I’ve got enough on my plate saving your father and keeping this crapfest of a place from getting any worse than it already is. And the clock’s ticking. Got three days left, counting today. You’re a good girl, but I’m a busy man.”

“All the more reason you need my help,” Sayaka said, the seriousness of her intentions not slipping in the slightest.

What a pain, Kyoya thought. However her father might be some savior of the modern age, she lived in a little world of her own. Even if she didn’t, she couldn’t just waltz in here in the middle of the night like she was going to the mall.

“Let me cut to the chase. It’s gonna take all I’ve got keeping my own self in one piece. The last thing I need is to be dragging around a ball and chain. Beating off that last attack was no walk in the park, believe me. We need to go our separate ways. Right now, I’m quaking in my boots, my head feels like it’s gonna split open, my arms and legs are about to fall off, and my heart could explode out of my chest any minute.”

He wasn’t exaggerating. Stomping that monster fish and shooting the needle through Suiki’s eye took all of his concentrated psychic energy. He was exhausted.

“But didn’t you defeat those demons?” Sayaka said encouragingly.

“Problem is, I got as good as I gave.”

“Either way, you wounded them severely. A demon that Master Rai said was impervious to any kind of physical attack—you defeated with a single needle. Using more powerful weapons, you surely would have crushed it. You were magnificent. More importantly, despite being against it all along, you came to Shinjuku anyway. The Master wasn’t wrong to believe in you.”

“As if you would understand,” Kyoya said peevishly, lying down on the ground. And yet, the way the corners of his mouth turned up, he was not as put out as he might pretend.

“Anyway—”

“I’m going with you.”

“You don’t get it, do you? I’m saying you’re a burden I don’t want to carry around.”

“That’s because you care about me. Think of me as the air. Do whatever you want as if I wasn’t there. I’ll be your shadow, never getting in your way. I’m an Aikido three-*dan*. And I’ve got this laser ring. Any monsters or gangsters show up and I can take care of myself.”

“Look here—”

“Besides, any time you spend trying to send me back is time wasted. Especially if I resist.”

“You, resist?” Kyoya said, his eyes widening.

“That’s why I’m asking you to let me go with you. I can’t shut myself away in some safe place while my father is in such dire straits.”

Sayaka’s eyes glistened. The old saying was no less true here and now—no man could resist the tears of a beautiful woman.

Kyoya sighed. “Fine. Do whatever.”

“Oh! Thank you!”

Suddenly she was right there, with her sixteen-year-old lithesome limbs circled around his neck. The supple warm softness of her breasts pressed against his back.

Kyoya flushed and jerked around. “Idiot! This is hardly the time or place for that!”

Sayaka was only wearing her bra and panties, making her buxom dimensions plain as day. “Don’t look!” she shrieked, like any normal sixteen-year-old. She blushed bright red and ran back behind the wall.

“Um, ah, you all right?” Kyoya stammered, then said more forcefully, “You coming along is *your* decision, so don’t go looking for sympathy. Start complaining or whining, and we’re through. One more thing: if any of those chaps from the Information Bureau come for you, they’re getting no argument from me. You’re all theirs.”

Sayaka smiled and nodded. “Yes, but I left a message for Yamashina saying not to come looking for me. If it came out that I was in Shinjuku, and if anything should happen to me here, they’d likely be held responsible by the press, so I am quite sure they’ll do nothing.”

“That’s all?” Kyoya said doubtfully. “You’ll just leak it to the tabloids, that’s all?”

“Um, no.” Sayaka mulled over the right way to put it. “Rather, ah, words to the effect that if push came to shove, it might lead to demotions and budget cuts and the like.”

For a moment, Kyoya stared at her cherubic countenance. Then he blurted

out, “Man, I so do not want to get on your bad side.”

The moaning and maledictions filled the gloom of the Sorcerer’s hideout. Suiki writhed on the cold floor, hand pressed against his eye. The tip of the needle jutted out from between his fingers. The psychic energy Kyoya had concentrated in his “needlework *nenpo*” hadn’t only ruined his eye, but had shot clean through it and was now impossible to extract.

“You not only didn’t destroy the boy, he killed your demon fish, wounded you, and took our hostage. You have the gall to slink back here, a dishonorable fool. Well, you should suffer a while longer.”

The merciless voice resounded from the darkness, the voice of the Sorcerer. But different than before, suffused with a ghastly demonic energy that made the flailing Suiki forget his suffering for a second, start, and look around.

“Forgive me, Lord Sorcerer. I will have my revenge. But it hurts. Not only my eye, my whole body burns. Kyoya Izayoi, this is a grudge that will never be buried between us.”

“Yes. Never. You will extinguish him before he finds us. Can you do that? Can you swear to me, Suiki?”

“I swear. Upon my life and existence in the Demon Realm. Do something about this needle!”

A moment of silence. Then harsh laughter. “Fine. Come to the operating table.”

Suiki stumbled to the back of the shadowed room. An operation was underway. Bathed in the blinking light from the computer displays, the machines silently executed the program.

The results of the operation lay upon the altar. Inside the glimmering pale mannequin that housed the soul was a skeleton of specialized metal alloy construction. What appeared to be a variety of electrical components were secured to the surrounding banks of machines by thousands of conduits and electronic synapses and translucent tubes.

Now and then, the light of the “soul” dimmed, and the low computerized voice reciting the incantations spilled forth from the speakers, breathing life

back into it.

This was a Demon Realm surgery, executed by the program in the computer's memory according to the haunting incantations, sans the blood transfusion equipment, cardiogenic steroids, life-support systems—all of the usual medical essentials.

“Come.”

Drawn by the supremely confident command, Suiki approached a corner of the operating table. The charcoal black skeleton grew transparent—or rather, the dark arms coiled around the pale soul rose from the table. The steel fingers clamped around the end of the needle in Suiki's eye and without any resistance pulled it out.

Suiki backed away with a fearful-sounding howl. He and his fellow demons didn't follow the Sorcerer because his powers exceeded theirs. The beings summoned to this world must bow down to he who summoned them—a law that had existed since ancient times. But now it was clear to him that the dead Sorcerer lying on the altar before him possessed powers that indeed surpassed theirs.

With a *ping*, the Sorcerer tossed the twisted needle onto the floor. “Is Kaki present?”

“I am here.” Kaki emerged from the darkness.

“Accompany Suiki and find the boy and the girl. They needn't be killed. Until my surgeries are finished, they must not come to this location.”

Implying that once the operation was complete, he wouldn't mind how or when they attacked.

“Understood. I will once again take control of the girl's shadow.” A rare note of anger rang in the normally stoic Kaki's voice. Saying that Kyoya *needn't* be killed was the same as saying that they *couldn't* kill him. “Suiki, though, is of no use. He will stay behind and perform bodyguard duties.”

The sound of Suiki grinding his teeth in reaction to the harsh disdain could clearly be heard.

“No. Even having disposed of the sword containing his father’s psychic powers, he remains a frightening wielder of the *nenpo* arts. He may be honing those skills even as we speak. Including today, there are three more days before *its* appearance in the world. My operation will likely take that long. During that period, he absolutely cannot be permitted to step within these precincts. You will combine your forces in its defense. Of course, if he can be defeated, nothing would be more appreciated.”

A smile sneaked into that last sentence.

A ball of flame expanded, lighting up the inky darkness. “Let’s go, Suiki. Don’t forget her shadow.”

“Understood.”

The two demon sprites departed, and the mutterings of the dead man in the midst of the pitch black seemed to trail after them. “The powers of the Demon Realm are gathering. As things stand now, it might not have been necessary to deprive him of his wooden sword after all.”

Kyoya and Sayaka found themselves in the middle of the marketplace plaza.

They’d first sought out the taxi stand the hotel owner had told them about. Not only were there no taxies, but all of the shops had lowered their shutters. The streets were empty of pedestrian traffic.

When Sayaka had wandered through earlier in her hypnotic trance, the place had been packed. Something unexpected must have happened in the meantime. Had they been experienced residents of Shinjuku, they likely would have smelled trouble in the air and kept their distance. But they were in a hurry, and Sayaka didn’t remember a thing about the last time she’d been here.

“Maybe it’s a shopping holiday.”

“Maybe,” said Sayaka, perusing the map Kyoya had entrusted to her. “What if we cut through the market to Shin-Okubo station? We might be able to hail a taxi there.”

And so the two of them ended up at what had once been Shin-Okubo station. The mountains of rubble along the High Street cleared away to form a one-hundred-fifty-foot diameter plaza. The borders of the plaza were crowded with

people.

“What’s going on? Looks like an open air rave,” Sayaka said.

“Nothing like that. I smell death in the air. This must be why all the shops are closed. Wait here for a second.”

Kyoya slipped into the crowd. Mumbling, “Excuse me, excuse me,” he made his way to the front. Two yakuza gangs were staring each other down from either end of the plaza, ten or so to each side. Cradling old-type laser rifles and shotguns, they trash-talked each other, each trying to provoke the other.

In each gang were five far quieter types, radiating a killer vibe that the rest couldn’t begin to match. Kyoya’s attention was drawn to them. He said to the three-eyed mutant standing next to him, “Looks like trouble to me, like it’s gonna end up in a duel, eh?”

“That’s what I figure too. Hey, new face. Haven’t seen you around these parts before.”

“You know your turf.”

“I remember who’s been to the market even once. These eyes, you see.”

The man pointed at his forehead. The bright and clear third eye winked at him. It seemed the equivalent of a photographic memory.

“Best you not go wandering around. There are folks around here who like nothing better than picking fights with outsiders, you know?”

Despite his grotesque appearance, he seemed a friendly man. He had a newspaper stuck in the back pocket of his trousers. It was a daily tabloid detailing important events in Shinjuku and commercial activities in the markets. A few pages, but taking the concept of “freedom of the press” to its limits, seeing no problem with running ads from contract killers, for example. Though the location of the press was a closely-guarded secret.

“Strange situation. Can you clue me in on how it’s going down? The bunch over there, typical street gang, right?”

The man nodded. “The fat lady on the right, she leads the Hippopotamus Group. The skinny one on the left with the long neck, the Praying Mantis clan.

They've been struggling for control of this market for a long time. And today, all of a sudden, things suddenly hit the boiling point."

"Completely out of the blue?"

"From what I've heard, sometime around noon, Yoshiko—she's the head hippo of the Hippopotamus Group—hit on some girl younger and prettier than her. A bad habit of hers. Well, this girl had some moves on her, and four or five of Yoshiko's henchmen got sucked into the earth right before her eyes. Rumors had been floating around that the Praying Mantises put a couple of high power espers on the payroll. So she must have concluded the girl was one of them. The Hippos have been hiring espers for themselves too. This showdown was a long time coming."

"Scary," said Sayaka behind him. She sounded truly unnerved. "To think that a girl could suck people into the earth. It sounds more like that demon."

"It sure does." Kyoya nodded. For the time being, her ignorance was her strength. "But an esper battle sounds interesting. What? We can spare a few minutes."

"Yes. Ah, it's started."

The first contestants from the two groups proceeded to the center of the plaza. The Hippo's esper was a short, stocky middle-aged man. The Mantises sent in a tall and gangly guy, skin and bones. Also middle-aged. In fact, aside from their ages, the rest of the espers tended to physically resemble the gangs they represented.

Kyoya wondered aloud, "What, do espers fall into the tall and skinny category and the short and fat category?"

Sayaka said, "No, I think it all comes down to the leader's predilections. They seek out their own. Birds of a feather."

"Makes sense."

Kyoya thought it a dumb theory, though when Sayaka said it with a serious face, it was hard not to take seriously.

The buzzing crowd unexpectedly quieted. The stocky esper crossed his arms

in front of his chest. The gangly one made a sign with his fingers. The paranormal battle had begun.

The eyes of the skinny esper flashed with an incandescent fire. Twin rays of heat penetrated the stocky esper's chest. People in the crowd behind him hit the dirt as the rays flashed over their heads and smashed into a nearby shop. The esper's chest and the shop burst into magnesium-white flames.

The beams projected by the skinny esper's eyes reached three hundred thousand degrees. But though his clothes were engulfed with fire, a smile broke out on the chubby man's face. His right hand reached in the direction of his opponent. A bright red beam sprang from a device attached to his wrist.

It plunged into the skinny esper's forehead. He gurgled. The light died in his eyes. Smoke pouring from the hole in his head, he crumpled to the ground. A decisive victory. A murmur ran through the crowd.

"What just happened?" Sayaka asked in an emotional voice. "The tall one's heat ray struck first." Though she could retain her composure regardless of what straits she found herself in, the death and suffering of others was another matter entirely.

"The fastest is not always the most effective. Look." Kyoya pointed at the chubby man, who was slapping out the fires consuming his clothes. His chest was burned, but the flesh beneath wasn't even scratched. "He's a defensive player. That's where his true powers lie. The cells of his body can probably repair themselves as quickly as they're destroyed. Like one of those regenerating hydras. Cut one in two and you end up with two. His cells must do the same kind of thing. Cut off his head, stab him in the heart, as long as some cells remain they'll grow a new head or fill in the hole. Then he delivers the shot with the laser gun on his wrist. When fighting an esper who's all offense and no defense, that's enough."

Nodding in response to Kyoya's explanation, Sayaka looked intensely at the plaza. Another two mounted the stage. Again, a fat man and a tall guy. These two were in their twenties.

An invisible aura of death and destruction crossed between them. Without a sound, the fat one exploded from within like a popping kernel of corn. Almost

simultaneously, the tall one split apart from the crown of his head down to his waist. The tall guy's psychokinesis blew up the fat guy at the same time the fat guy's psychokinesis cut him in two. From this vantage point, the arrangement of the tall guy's internal organs were as visible as in an autopsy, though the surface was as smooth as glass and not a drop of blood spilled out.

The citizens of Demon City barely raised a collective eyebrow at the grisly deaths of the two espers. Certainly no one would shed a tear for them.

“Stop it, please!”

Sayaka momentarily forgot where she was and ran into the plaza, too quickly even for Kyoya to stop her. The espers and the crowd watched her utterly incongruous entrance in amazed silence.

“I do not know the reason, but you cannot continue these gruesome struggles!”

Sayaka's plea was filled with anger and grief. Tears that did not flow when thinking about her father struggling at death's door ran down her cheeks, glittering in the sunlight. Three lives had been lost before her eyes, and nobody had done anything to intercede, a spectacle that she could not abide.

Sayaka stood in the middle of the plaza and called compassionately, “No matter what your differences, killing each other is no solution. This must cease now. Don't you treasure the life your parents gave you?” She examined the two gangs, and then turned to the crowd. “Why didn't you do anything to stop it? It is a tragedy for any life to be lost for any reason. Do you enjoy watching such heartless murders take place?”

“Whaddya think? Of course we do!” came an answer from the crowd. “Quit raining on the parade.”

Laughter followed. “Take a hike, kid. Or take off your clothes.”

The laughter grew louder. A shadow like a small thunderhead stepped forward from the Hippopotamus Group. Yoshiko Kokonoe's narrow eyes filled with cruel glee.

“I thought I recognized your face. You're that girl from before. Hey, everybody, this one's a Praying Mantis esper!”

A rustle shot through the throngs like a strong wind through a field. The Praying Mantis boss yelled back angrily, “Don’t listen to that crap! She’s got nothing to do with us!”

“Playing dumb, eh? Fine. You and me will settle this later. For now, let’s see her true colors.”

She nodded at one of the remaining espers. With a roar of wind, Sayaka’s blouse and bra sheared off and floated away like chaff. She shrieked and crouched down. Claps and cat calls followed.

“Stop!” she said.

She meant Kyoya, who was about to charge into the fray. But it had the effect of halting the whistles and cheers for a minute.

Sayaka stood proud and straight. The exposed upper half of her body—hands pressed against her generous chest—trembled slightly, her white skin flushing red. She was a sixteen-year-old girl. There was no way she wouldn’t feel abashed.

A muted commotion stirred the air as Sayaka lowered her hands, exposing her breasts—large for her slender frame and tinged by bashfulness—to the crowd.

Not a hoot, not a jeer. A bold act of will for such an unworldly girl. Sayaka’s strange show of determination and courage struck the hearts of the unruly onlookers.

“Is this enough to get you to stop fighting?” she asked softly. Her desire to save the lives of the espers was the only thing that kept her from fainting dead on her feet.

Commendable, Princess, Kyoya murmured to himself. Coming here was worth it after all, if for her sake alone.

Sayaka called out again, the earnest expression on her face not faltering in the least, “If this will not mollify you, then I will bare the rest as well. Please, at the least, cease your fighting.”

The crowds, the gangs, all looked on silently. The hulking, menacing form of Yoshiko turned to the espers and shrieked, “What do you think you’re doing?”

Strip her naked! Shame her to death!” But the espers didn’t move. “Shit! You’re gonna let this brat play you all for fools?”

“Such foolishness! What could be more shameful than sending others to their deaths for your own profit and satisfaction?”

With the crystal-clear eyes fixed upon her, Yoshiko was at a loss for words. The dignity radiating from the body of the slight Sayaka thoroughly outclassed the rough woman.

“Kill her, Shimura!” she shouted desperately.

A seedy-looking underling with a pockmarked face aimed a laser gun at Sayaka. But faster than Kyoya could run to her, lights like camera flashes lit up the surrounding crowds, the beams converging on the underling, setting his shoulder and the weapon afire.

“Drop it, punk!” somebody called out. “Nobody lays a finger on the little lady!”

Another added, “If she wasn’t here, your brains would be decorating the asphalt!”

“You go, girl!” a rough but warm voice said. Then addressing the espers, “You guys better treat your lives a bit more valuable.”

“Damned straight. Anyway, it’s noon. Any more killing’s just going to get in the way. You guys came to this city to get a life too, not dig a grave.”

The throngs supporting Sayaka had turned on the two gangs.

“Get out of here, shit for brains! We got businesses to run here!” A shop owner obviously.

“Yeah,” piped up a woman. “Nobody orders us around and tells us how to live our lives here. That’s the law of Demon City.”

A chorus of agreement, along with chants of “Get lost!” and “Hey, hey, goodbye!”

The gangbangers glared back in a threatening manner, not intimidated in the least. They were the baddest badasses in this town, seasoned pros at madness and mayhem. The hearts of these men and women were unlikely to be touched

by the words of a cute girl who looked as if she would break in two if handled without kid gloves.

“Let’s call it a day, Hippos,” the Praying Mantis boss said with a wry smile. “No matter how much of the market you call your own turf, turn the customers against you and there’ll be nothing left worth fighting over.”

“It’s over when I say it’s over!” Yoshiko bellowed. She was bad to the bone, and determined to prove it with her dying breath. Her oil-drum sized torso shook with anger. “Same goes for you, bitch!”

The big cow charged at Sayaka. Then unexpectedly circled through the air in an elegant arc, before crashing down on the pavement in a cloud of dust. A repeat demonstration of Sayaka’s Aikido. This time accompanied by cheers and a round of applause.

At that moment, practically doubled over with laughter, Kyoya’s body suddenly tensed up, his senses coming alive in all directions. Threading through the noisy rabble, a blood-red demonic aura reached across the plaza. Its source was close by. It was stronger this time. There were at least two of them.

But as for where and how they would make their appearance, even focusing his mind and *nen*, it was like groping his way through a thick fog. He could make out only the vaguest details. He was still fighting off the fatigue, a real disadvantage in a long fight.

My best bet is to beat them to the punch just as they’re emerging and bolt. Except I’m facing more than one opponent this time.

He had to get Sayaka to safety. Standing there in the middle of the common, she might as well draw a target on her bare chest. If she didn’t have any more value to them, they’d take her out along with him in a heartbeat.

He started forward just as the demon vibe moved, concentrating with alarming speed in a space several yards away from Sayaka.

Damn. Found us!

A crimson flame silently appeared in the sunlight. The crowds gasped. Not in fear, rather more in the manner of those who lived in Demon City. They were accustomed to the supernatural. When something weird happened, their natural

instincts were no longer to run, but to lean closer to get a better look.

Sayaka turned and stopped cold. Though she had the presence of mind not to look in Kyoya's direction.

"Girl—"

A voice from within the flames, stripped of all human emotion. Less a "voice" than words strung together.

"As long as your shadow is in my grasp, there is no place you can go that I won't find you. You and the boy who destroyed Doki will burn in the fires of hell. Where is he?"

"We split up. He said he was going to look for the Sorcerer. I'm here alone."

The flames laughed coldly. "Really? It doesn't matter. Your shadow will lead me to him." He called out, "Show yourself, boy. Else I will snuff out the spark of this girl's life. A death by my hand is a painful death indeed."

"What's this monster shooting off his mouth about?" A big bull of a man trotted out of the crowd and interposed himself between Sayaka and Kaki. He had a laser gun in his right hand. "Don't you dare lay a finger on her. Or you'll get what's coming."

"Ah, a gallant knight. Six hundred years ago in England, the fools I encountered said the same thing. Are you the one who fought Doki?"

"No," said Sayaka. "He's—"

She was about to step in front of him when the laser gun flashed. The beam passed through the heart of the flame. It didn't even flicker.

Surprised more than he was afraid, the big man gaped at Kaki, just as a flying fist of fire filled his mouth.

His scream erupted as an inarticulate gargle as he fell to the ground, clawing at his chest. Red-hot flames poured from his mouth and ears and nostrils, like he'd turned into a fire-breathing dragon. His body appeared completely unscathed from the outside. Kaki's accursed fires consumed only the internal organs.

"Stop it!" Sayaka cried out.

Kyoya broke through the cordon of onlookers and sprang forward. He had in his right hand the newspaper he'd "borrowed" from the back pocket of the man he'd been talking to. As he ran, he rolled it into a kind of sword.

"Son of a bitch! Eat shit and die!" he yelled, adopting an uncharacteristically uncouth manner in hopes of hiding his true identity. If Kaki underestimated him, he could fend off the first attack and then deliver the fatal blow before Kaki could recover.

There was only one problem with the plan.

"Kaki! That's him!" A voice thick with hatred hurled at him as the ground beneath his feet turned to water.

At the last second, as the sound waves reached him, he'd taken a flying leap. Kaki's fire reached out with a roar. While in the air, the paper sword flashed, intercepting the ball of fire and shattering it into a thousand pieces. Just as he landed, he pushed his *nen* into the "sword" and struck the ground with it.

He did this in order to check Suiki's magic. As he landed, he brought the "sword" to the vertical and intercepted a second volley from Kaki, and then ran to Sayaka.

His feet came to a sudden halt. "Damn!" he cursed to himself, as Sayaka sank into the pavement down to her ankles.

"Don't come any closer!" she cried out.

"No, come on." Suiki's victorious voice flowed across the plaza. "I will drag you both down to a Davy Jones's Locker. In the pit of my stomach."

Kaki added, "Throw away that toy. Or the girl dies first. Want to watch her struggling in a watery grave?"

Kyoya froze. He couldn't move. He'd happily take on two demons by himself. But with Sayaka in the mix, there was little he could do. She was ten feet away. The time it'd take him to cross those ten feet was plenty of time for Suiki to demonstrate his powers. He was facing the worst of all possible stand-offs.

"Kyoya-san, run!" Sayaka shouted. "You are our only hope. Think of the people of the world, not me!"

“How self-sacrificing,” Kaki sneered. “What will you do, boy? *You* are our target now. If you promise not to resist, I will persuade Suiki to let the girl live.”

No matter how fierce the battle, Kyoya’s mood remained all the more laid-back at the height of it. But now a flinch of concern showed for the first time. He could hardly count on Kaki telling the truth, all the more reason why he couldn’t abandon Sayaka even as she wept and pleaded for him to cast her aside and save others.

He slowly lowered the paper sword.

Sayaka abruptly groaned and threw back her head. She was about to bite down on her tongue when an unexpected force stopped her.

“Hey!”

Kyoya and the two demons shouted practically in unison. Sayaka vaulted from the ground and shot through the air with tremendous speed, then gently landed feet-first next to Kyoya.

Putting out a hand to steady her, he cast his eyes around the plaza. In one corner, their hands linked together, stood seven men. The remaining espers, enemy and ally alike, combining their psychic energies to save Sayaka.

“Get going!” shouted one. “Whatever else happens, be sure to save her!”

“Thank you! But why—?”

Another answered the unfinished question. “You’re the only one who ever went out of her way for a bunch of bastards like us. We won’t forget it!”

“We’ve brought those demons to a standstill with our psychokinesis. Escape while you can!”

Kyoya called back, “But they’re not exactly the types to forgive and forget!”

His psychic powers and those of the espers were essentially the same. What distinguished the two was the kind of training and the refinement of the particular skill. No matter how powerful the esper’s *nen*, it didn’t extend much beyond moving and manipulating physical objects.

With a degree of self-control mastered through yoga and *zazen*, Kyoya could push his *nen* beyond the restraints of physical law and strike at demons from

other worlds. His was a superpower that arose out of what might best be called a “spiritual dimension,” fundamentally different from that of the espers, more akin to the exorcising power of a priest amplified several thousand times.

In short, the psychic powers of the espers could never eradicate the presence of the Demon Realm. They had been able to extract Sayaka from Suiki’s grip only because there was one among them who, although his powers were tiny in comparison, had undergone the same kind of training as Kyoya.

“We know,” answered another esper. “But we have enough strength to hold them back while you escape. The girl said it was for the good of the world. It may not count for much but let us do what we can for such a cause.”

“Goodbye, princess. If I had a girl like you in my life, I’m sure I would have made something of myself more than what I am today. Get going!”

“Go on. Take off!”

Sayaka’s eyes filled with tears. Kyoya vowed to himself. There wasn’t the time to find out who they were. But he would never forget their faces. With a quick bow to the espers, he grabbed Sayaka’s hand and bounded away.

“Don’t let them escape!”

“You meddlesome worms!”

The demonic curses swirled after them. Constrained by the psychic powers of the espers, Kyoya didn’t sense the demons themselves in hot pursuit.

As they plunged through the crowds, someone draped a shirt around Sayaka’s shoulders. “Thank you, everybody,” she shouted over her shoulder.

They crossed the common to the street they’d arrived on. An old electric taxi was parked at the Meiji Avenue intersection. The two of them practically dove inside.

The elderly driver cast a suspicious look through the ballistic glass partition. “Where to? Don’t go getting me messed up in any funny business.”

His suspicion was well deserved. Kyoya was still holding the scorched, rolled up newspaper. Sayaka hadn’t had the time to button the shirt and had one hand pressed against her breasts, exposing her smooth round shoulders and stomach.

It was obvious at a glance that she had nothing else on beneath. An unusual sight even for a Demon City hack.

“Shinjuku, Kabuki-cho,” said Kyoya, rapping on the back of the front seat. “And step on it.”

“Ain’t driving into the middle of a dangerous place like that.”

“Then as close as you feel comfortable. The sooner the better.”

“You got any money?”

“Want me to buy you a new car?”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Its outward appearance notwithstanding, the cab accelerated with remarkable smoothness. Kyoya twisted around to look out the rear window. The demons were after them. They had defeated the espers.

“Faster, man.”

The taxi raced down old Meiji Avenue, devoid of signs of human life. Without tearing his eyes away from the rear window, he cast a tense sideways glance at Sayaka. She said in a choked-up voice, “Do you think—they—”

“Let’s just imagine they got away by the skin of their teeth and we’ll see them again someday. Okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed, managing to hold back the tears.

“So, kids, this an elopement or a kidnapping?” the cabbie asked, humming to himself.

“The latter. And I killed five more just for getting in my face.”

The cabbie laughed. “Good job! Not enough youngsters with initiative around these days. Say, you need any help with the ransom, let me know. Don’t mean to boast, but I’m as good as they get in Shinjuku. I can shake a mobile police patrol car just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “How about twenty percent?”

Kyoya and Sayaka didn’t have an answer to that. A fireball appeared in the middle of an intersection behind them. Kaki and Suiki were closing the distance, the road and ruins dissolving like wax in a hot oven in their wakes.

“But I’d settle for fifteen,” the cabbie said with carefree nonchalance, that seemed to include not looking in the rearview mirror.

Kyoya closed his eyes, pushing his *nen* into the ragged newspaper. “All right,” he said, his face pale with concentration. He opened the window.

The cabbie misunderstood. “It’s a deal,” he said enthusiastically, thumbing the steering wheel. “A hot little number like that, partner, and the sky’s the limit.”

The two demons were less than fifteen feet behind them. “Here’s a holy hand grenade for you!” Kyoya shouted, and threw the newspaper at them.

A tongue from the ball of fire reached out and snapped at it like a dog. As the flames consumed it, at a point midway between the cab and the demons the sword erupted in a colorless, soundless explosion. Kyoya’s psychic energies scattered like shrapnel in all directions.

With a roar, the fireball blew apart. The ruins stopped dissolving. Suiki must have caught some of the damage as well.

After confirming the results, Kyoya sat back heavily in the seat. The skirmish in the plaza and the *nenpo* hand grenade had used up much of his mental energy. The loss of Asura alone had proved exhausting to his psychic reservoirs.

“They won’t be coming after us for now.”

“Did you defeat them?” Sayaka asked anxiously, peering out the rear window.

“No. The fight back there in the plaza pretty much drained me. All I can do now is slow them down. They’ll be after us again in no time.”

“What are you chattering on about back there?” the cabbie interrupted. He hadn’t noticed his own close escape from death, and was remarkably relaxed for somebody who’d just taken an active stake in a kidnapping. “So where do you plan on hiding her? There’s an empty warehouse over by the Imperial Gardens. Now and then, these huge carnivorous worms make their nests there.”

Ignoring the cabbie’s chatter, Sayaka lay Kyoya’s head in her lap. When he tried to resist, she flashed him a fierce look. The young *nenpo* master smiled wryly and closed his eyes. He was exhausted physically, mentally, spiritually.

He was at his limit. *And two of those monsters remain.* He still had to break

the Sorcerer's spell, and seriously feared going down for the count before they reached the enemy's lair.

And as if she could see into the heart of the uncharacteristically enervated Kyoya, Sayaka thought as well: *It was the last thing on earth he wanted to do. And yet he fought like this tooth and nail. So did the espers.*

She really had been a burden. The least she could do was give him a place to lay his head. At that instant, Sayaka wished to ride to the ends of the earth feeling Kyoya's weight on her lap.

Several minutes later, the taxi barreled up to the Meiji Avenue and Yasukuni Avenue intersection. Though the surrounding ruins looked no different, the pedestrian traffic had increased markedly. Yakuza and pimps and hired guns dressed in garish threads and wearing threatening looks, the cut of society that gave a place a bad name.

"So those are the kind of people who live around here?" Sayaka asked the cabbie.

"Kabuki-cho is home to every type of punk, roughneck and madman you can imagine. Come night, and it turns into a staging ground for murder and mayhem. We're not quite there yet, so relax. I'm delivering you to a place with a guaranteed security perimeter."

He still expected a ransom to change hands at the end of all this.

"Yes, thank you." Sayaka bowed her head. She couldn't speak for Kyoya's state of mind.

At that moment, a crash and a bellow from the cabbie resounded simultaneously through the vehicle. One of the punks had leapt into the street and swung a plastic bag and its red liquid contents against the windshield. With a heavy slushy sound, the thick glass began to melt. That wasn't tomato juice obviously.

"Bastard!" the cabbie yelled. The punk whirled around. The cabbie didn't hesitate, but cranked the steering wheel hard over and chased him up on the sidewalk. The pedestrians screamed and shouted and scrambled out of the way. About to get body checked by the fender, the punk dove sideways to safety—

and right into a dumpster next to a cafeteria.

“Serves you right, buster!”

The cabbie laughed in high spirits. “We ought to scrape all them punks together in one big pile and feed ’em to the coin purse and spit ’em out in the DMZ. Man, that’d feel good.”

He was still venting when Kyoya—dead to the world till that moment—popped up like a jack-in-the-box. “The coin purse. You mean that pan-dimensional thing floating outside the Waseda Hotel?”

He asked this question with a degree of seriousness that suggested a negative answer might cost him a limb. The cabbie paled a bit and didn’t contradict him.

Kyoya continued, “Everything it eats gets spit out in the DMZ? Did I get that right?”

“That’s what the rumors say. I haven’t seen it for myself.”

“Because nobody’s made it back alive, I suspect.” Kyoya fell silent for a minute, then said, “Let’s give Kabuki-cho a pass for the time being. Take us to this DMZ. I’ll get out there.”

The cabbie jerked the steering wheel and hastily corrected. Even Sayaka looked at him with wide eyes.

“Don’t be a fool, kid. I don’t care how much you pay me, I ain’t locking up the little lady in a place like that. And let’s get this straight too—stiff me and I’ll haul your ass straight back to your ma and pa.”

“Sorry, but we’re putting the kidnapping on hold for now. The treasure hunt takes priority.”

“Just a second!” the cabbie exclaimed.

“Take it easy. I’m not that stupid.” Kyoya pointed at Sayaka and said, “Take her outside Shinjuku, any police station will do. You can expect a more than generous tip from the Federation government.”

“You don’t say?” the cabbie said, clearly impressed. “So out there, I can return the kidnapped lady and collect a reward. I like that idea a lot better.”

But Sayaka said, rather like a whiny child, “Don’t go deciding things for me. I don’t want to.”

“I got no time to argue. Those monsters shouldn’t follow you outside Shinjuku. I will definitely get your shadow back. So sit back, have some tea, relax and wait for me.”

“I don’t care. I don’t like it. In the first place, why are you going to a dangerous place like that? What do you mean, treasure hunting?”

Now she was getting irritating. Kyoya hissed, “Don’t you get it? That business in the plaza, to start with. All you did was tie my hands. If those espers hadn’t stepped in, it would have been lights out for both of us!”

Sayaka hung her head and closed her mouth.

I’m sorry, Kyoya said in his heart. *But you know that those espers lent their power on your behalf.* After this, he was heading to a place no lady should go. When it came to the difficult, the dangerous and the dirty, a man had to step up by himself.

“I understand,” said Sayaka, in a voice almost too soft to be heard.

The taxi raced down Yasukuni Avenue and turned onto the Oume Highway and stopped in front of endless rows of razor wire. There was a gap in the fencing wide enough for a single person to sneak through. On the other side of the fifteen-foot fence was the old heart of Shinjuku, now the infamous no-man’s-land known as the “DMZ.”

The forest of skyscrapers, smugly disregarding the architectural carnage all around them, challenged the sky as they had in times gone by.

Kyoya got out of the taxi. He didn’t look back at Sayaka and instead said to the cabbie, “She’s in your hands. Keep the doors locked so she doesn’t bolt. Oh, and enough with the kidnapping business, okay?”

“Don’t worry,” the cabbie reassured him with a friendly smile. “Not to boast of my own moral fortitude, but that wasn’t nothing I could pull off on my own.” He stuck out his hand. “I don’t rightly understand it myself, but seems to me you’re risking your life for a good cause. It might not mean much coming from a loser like me, but I’m praying for you, kid. You leave her to me.”

Kyoya shook the man's hand, a clasp rough and warm. Sayaka pressed her face against the window glass as the taxi sped off.

He turned his eyes toward the heavens. Twilight was falling. The shadows of the tall buildings drew dark lines against the rusty red sun, like tombstones rising to meet the young warrior. He briefly cast his mind back to the life he'd left behind in Tokyo, the buoyant faces of Shiratori and Kayama, his high school life where hope sprang eternal.

As if channeling their thoughts, Kyoya Izayoi said to himself: *This is one hell of a mess you've gotten yourself into.* But then he shrugged and walked towards the fence.

Part Seven

New York City. Two o'clock in the morning. Only the walls of the hospital adjacent to the World Federation building were clearly visible, brightly lit up by the exterior flood lamps. A flashing dot of red pinpointed an ambulance approaching the main entrance.

The same time Kyoya stepped into the DMZ.

The job of this ambulance was to bear the wounded or the dead from the scene of an accident to the Center for Regenerative Medicine, sealed in a resuscitation unit that kept only the brain alive. The World Federal hospital could rightly boast of the most advanced facilities in the world.

The vehicle stopped short of the ambulance bay. The roof over the resuscitation unit opened up like a pair of hinged doors, revealing a four-tube rocket launcher. Just as hospital personnel raced out to remove the resuscitation unit, they fired simultaneously.

And disappeared into a corner of the secure wing of the hospital — hidden from outside view — Kozumi Rama's room. The air shook. The entire wing was consumed by a hellish dance of fire.

Before the security cyborgs and esper guards arrived, the ambulance had sped off. It was discovered the next day in an alley in the South Bronx, though the perpetrators were nowhere to be found.

It appeared that a commando squad from a certain country opposed to the president's policies had staged an accident, called an ambulance and then commandeered it in order to pull off a terrorist act.

Upon being informed, the terrified Federation High Council immediately commenced rescue operations, though the best they could hope for was recovery of the bodies.

Except that, while frustrated by the hundreds of tons of concrete rubble, the hard-working search and rescue teams and medical personnel experienced a miracle.

“We got a body here! No, wait! He’s alive.”

“Here too. One—two—three—at least five! I don’t believe it. An explosion like that, not a mark on them!”

The startled cries filled the courtyard. And then under a big block of concrete they discovered Master Rai, legs crossed in the lotus position, and the president, lying unscathed on the bed. Employing extrasensory abilities imparted by years of yoga training, he had anticipated the missile attack, and in the last moment before impact wrapped his psychic energies around the center of the room, creating the miracle.

The president was transferred to a gurney and moved to another room. Accompanying him, Master Rai muttered to himself, “This is taking its toll on an old man like me, Kyoya. Two more days. The fate of the world rests on your shoulders.” A minute later he added in ragged tones, “These old bones are feeling the effects of the fireworks. It’s hard to say how much longer I can hold out on this end.”

The dull sound of a four-cycle gasoline engine shook the stagnant air. Exiting the Sumitomo Building and walking along the empty street, Kyoya stopped and cast his senses out around him.

These were the mysterious noises the hotel owner told him about. Anybody driving a motorcycle around these parts was unlikely to be an upright and law-abiding type. This was the kind of place where the more heavily armed the better. But Kyoya didn’t have so much as a letter opener on him.

He was standing on what had once been known as Tenth Street. It ran between the Sumitomo and Mitsui buildings before eventually intersecting with the old Koshu Highway. A hundred feet further on and to his left towered the majestic Keio Plaza Hotel. A dozen yards behind him was a flight of stairs leading to the lower road level. That road crossed beneath Tenth Street at right angles, linking the west entrance of Shinjuku station to Chuo Park.

He was ten yards from the Sumitomo Building. Before him, the broken

facades and shattered glass from the Devil Quake were scattered across the ground. Just for his peace of mind, something here might make a handy weapon; but he was already bummed out a bit and didn't feel inclined to look for anything.

He'd climbed to the top of the building for a look around the DMZ to see if he could spot the point where the "coin purse" disgorged its contents. It had proved an utter goose chase. The park was wrapped in haze. He couldn't see a thing. And nowhere else lingered any evidence of pan-dimensional spaces.

The sound of the engine came closer. A strange noise, going up and down, left and right. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. He was starting to think the thing was alive.

He concentrated his senses, but couldn't pin down its location. "Whoa!" he shouted, falling to his knees on the road. A freezing breath—devoid of any physical presence—sank down to the center of his brain. Though his fatigue had something to do with it, it was in any case an extraordinary strong spear of pure malice.

The lingering resentments of all the people who died here. There was nothing to be gained fighting them.

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, the source of the roar and the malice contracted. *Above!* He looked up, toward the roof of the Sumitomo Building, fifty-two stories and seven hundred thirty feet above him. Perched there was the silhouette of a rider astride what looked for all the world like a 750cc motorcycle.

Kyoya hadn't been in the DMZ two hours, and the battle was about to begin.

The rider must have spotted him from the start. He looked a mean son of a bitch. Kyoya didn't know how he got up there, but he had the feeling he'd be coming back down, and Kyoya didn't plan on sticking around.

He changed directions and ran toward the staircase. He wasn't trying to hide. His instincts told him that there was a time to stand and fight and a time to turn tail and run, and this was clearly the latter. That guy had bad luck written all over him.

Kyoya hadn't gone more than a yard when the rider and the bike landed on the ground with a thudding explosive impact, and stood there motionless between him and the stairwell. He'd fallen fifty-two stories and didn't bounce once. The glistening black machine unleashed an ominous rumble. There was death in its echoes.

The rider was wearing black leather and his face was hidden behind a racing helmet. It was the pure malevolence radiating from his body that froze Kyoya in his tracks.

Kyoya raised a hand. "Just a sec. I'm guessing you're a dead guy with a really big chip on his shoulder. But you just can't go around attacking people at random. Though from the vibe you're giving off, I don't imagine you're the type to listen to advice."

The 750cc engine roared. Kyoya leapt sideways and out of the way. Before the rider could turn the bike around, he vaulted over the wall around the stairwell and landed on the road below. He felt a sharp stab of pain as his knees absorbed the shock, but didn't hesitate, jumping to his feet and heading toward the Mitsui Building.

The shocking scene before him brought him to a halt before he could get going. The roadway and sidewalks were strewn with white bones. They'd been run over, crushed, the clothing torn asunder, the remains robbed of any lingering humanity. The fate of people unlucky enough to wander in here unawares. The skeletons of children were there as well.

Kyoya shook with anger. Damned vengeful ghosts and their grudges. How did anyone with a human heart end up like that?

A memory from his training on Mt. Daisetsu sparked to life. Coughing up blood, under his father's verbal lash, day by day he'd experienced the feeling of moving toward a higher mental plane. And behind him, buried in the depths of the human heart, was a black clod of resentment pushing him along.

You and me both, bud. So who's the real human here?

Kyoya sprinted to the left, into the road. A black bolt of lightning skimmed past him. He rolled and came to his feet. His legs hurt like hell. Jumping down from Tenth Street was bad enough. He slumped to his knees. At full strength, he

could handle a fall of three hundred feet without a problem, but his *nen* was slow coming back to full strength.

The 750cc bike whirled around without losing speed, caromed off the retaining wall alongside the roadway, and came at him straight on. Kyoya didn't have time to correct his posture. Instead, he tucked himself into a ball, arms over his head, and concentrated all his psychic energy. In the moment that the tires were about to roll over him, he sprang vertically with all his might.

Kyoya's loud shout rang down the street. The ghost rider should have sailed over him, done a one-eighty, and landed on his head. Except the rider and bike did another half-turn the moment before contact, kicking his foot against the ground. The same as when he'd fallen from the roof of the building, landing with an eerie kind of gracefulness.

Even so, perhaps equally startled by Kyoya's moves, he didn't continue the attack right away. They faced off less than six feet apart.

Kyoya felt for the first time in his life that this was a confrontation more than a *metaphorical* matter of life and death. This was one bad dude. And Kyoya didn't have the psychic strength left to go another ten rounds with him. He'd have to end it with a single, clinching shot. But use that, and things could get even worse from here on out.

Such a clinching shot required tapping the spare reserve of *nen* in Kyoya's subconscious. He couldn't control it. All he could do was deliver it all in one blast. After that, he'd be spent for the next twenty-four hours minimum. A literal last shot.

A weapon sure would come in handy. Kyoya glanced to the side. The machine charged him. He jumped, throwing a kick at the rider's head. The sideways glance was a bluff.

But the soles of his feet met only empty air. The rider flipped over his head and with perfect timing landed back on the speeding bike.

At the same time, Kyoya splayed backwards onto the ground, grunting in pain. During his leap, the rider had flung a hidden chain around Kyoya's throat, and dragged him along the pavement.

The back of his trainer ripped open, rubbing the flesh raw. He wrapped his hand around the chain, but couldn't budge it. Without using his *nenpo*, there was nothing he could do. Right now, Kyoya possessed the fighting strength of a normal human being.

The rider spun around, clearly intending to crack the end of this whip against the retaining wall.

Time to call on his reserves!

Kyoya's thoughts were interrupted by an arrow of light. The chain broke apart, sending him tumbling across the ground. He absorbed the blows and turned his attention toward the source of the light beam.

Standing at the foot of the stairs was Sayaka, her right hand pushed out in front of her. The laser ring on full power melted the chain in two. Considering who was doing the shooting, he wasn't surprised that she hadn't aimed at the rider. Though her aim was remarkable.

The rider turned his attention from Kyoya and accelerated his machine at the new opponent. Sayaka couldn't press the button on the laser, assaulted by the onrushing tide of malice. Drunk with the joy in slaughter, the monster bore down on her.

He was practically on top of her when his back bowed, his head flew back, and the bike zipped out from under him, banking to the left for several yards before spinning around uselessly as its innate ferocity drained away.

"Kyoya-san!"

Sayaka came back to herself and ran toward him. Observing Kyoya getting to his feet, apparently unharmed, she instead approached the rider. He'd been thrown from his bike. A bone was buried deeply through the black leather covering his back. With her life in the balance, Kyoya had imbued the bone of a nearby victim with his spare *nen* and flung it at him.

For the first time, the rider's voice escaped the confines of the helmet. "Hit the ground and it's curtains for me. But I cannot die. They won't let me sleep. I will surely return."

Sayaka felt a shiver down her spine, knowing the Sorcerer in his hideout had

said the same thing. Nevertheless, she knelt down on the road and laid his head in her lap.

Kyoya came up to them.

“Kyoya-san, this man—”

“Yeah, he’s dead. He died a long time ago.”

Sayaka nodded. The previous dousing of malice from him told her that much.

“How did you get away from the taxi?” Kyoya asked under his breath. He wasn’t angry. He’d escaped a certain death thanks to her. If anything, he was too tired to be angry. He could barely manage a hoarse whisper.

“I had no intent of fleeing to safety by myself. So I melted the door lock with my laser.”

Kyoya shrugged. “I feel sorry for the cabbie. Well, water under the bridge. Let’s go.”

“Wait. We just can’t leave him here.”

“Hey, show a little discretion when it comes to spreading the love around. Take a look at those bones over there. That guy ran over anybody who came in here. The beast should die the death he dealt to others.” The skeletal remains of the children still lingered in his mind’s eye. “Heaven’s judgment.”

“And if it was you?” Sayaka quietly fixed her eyes on him.

Kyoya reconsidered his first retort and smiled wryly. “All right then. Go ahead.” He sat down on the sidewalk.

With a small smile, Sayaka touched the helmet. It was coated with dark red from the crown of the helmet to the bottom edge.

“It’s useless,” the rider moaned. “This helmet is stained with the blood of those I ran over and crushed to death. It won’t come off until they release the curse. Their anger burns. *Kill him*, they say. *Drag him down, trample him underfoot*—”

“You are an unlucky man,” Sayaka softly said. “Begrudging others, stealing away their lives, and now cursed by them in turn.”

Human emotion filled the rider's voice. "How strange. When they hear your voice, they do not draw near. Stay by my side. Don't leave me alone—"

"I'm here. Tell me about it, what is so painful and so sad."

The rider explained. The day of the Devil Quake, he'd turned eighteen and could finally have the Kawasaki he dreamed of. He'd worked his fingers to the bone, barely eating even, to save up the money.

And on that fated night, racing along Tenth Street, the Devil Quake threw him to the street below, crushing his body and snuffing out his life. Astride his beloved bike, the happiest man alive, he could not accept the hand that fate had dealt him and cursed his death.

Then the haunted miasmas invaded Shinjuku, turning the skyscrapers into an ancient stone circle that in turn triggered more ghostly and occult phenomena. All those with lingering regrets and attachments to the mortal world—vengeful ghosts, the souls of suicides—gathered there in the heart of Shinjuku and began to curse and possess any who ventured there.

With his particularly strong regrets, he was transformed by the unearthly winds, becoming a physical manifestation of all those grudges and regrets, with his beloved bike mowing down everyone he found wandering there. In the end, possessed by maledictions of the slaughtered dead, the mad blood condemned him to hunt down new victims until the end of eternity.

"How tragic." Sayaka's tears fell onto the helmet.

A moment later, she gasped. Joy flooded her features. The bloody, immovable helmet loosened slightly. Kyoya stood up, a disbelieving expression on his face.

"They—they disappeared. All of them—gone." Happiness suffused the rider's voice. He grasped Sayaka's arm with a hand clad in a worn leather glove.

"Thank you. Thank you. Now I can truly die and leave this accursed place. You should leave quickly as well."

"First there's something I'd like to ask you," Kyoya said, coming to his side. "Do you know where that pan-dimensional thing called the coin purse disgorges its contents in the DMZ?"

The rider gestured with his right hand toward Chuo Park. "The library in the

forest. Near there. But be careful. The forest is home to nests of haunted creatures and angry ghosts far stronger than what you'll find here."

"Thank you," said Kyoya, from the bottom of his heart. "I am very grateful to you."

Strength seemed to seep out of the rider's body. "No—problem. You—could I get your name?"

"Sayaka."

"A name like a pleasant breeze. A good name. My name is—"

His voice stopped. His hand fell to the ground. The ghost rider had finally earned his eternal rest. His head in her lap, Sayaka hadn't moved the whole time. Kyoya looked on with a sense of awe.

The espers in the market plaza—this vengeful ghost rider—the girl's touch turned evil to good. Perhaps as much could be expected from the daughter of a "holy man," but a valuable gem in any case. Perhaps her touch could transform even Demon City.

A little while later, Sayaka quietly got to her feet. "What if we removed the helmet?"

"The curse seems to have been broken. I think he would want to sleep like this."

"You're probably right."

Kyoya's eyes were drawn to the bike. At some point it'd become covered with red rust. The bike was following the rider to the grave.

"There's some open space over there. We can bury him and the rest of the remains. After that, we'd better go back inside the building. The night around here is too dangerous to go running around. We'll wait until morning."

That was when Sayaka noticed their surroundings were wrapped in a falling dusk. The stars of autumn twinkled in the darkening sky. Unaware, the time had slipped past six.

Filling in the grave, Sayaka appealed to Kyoya, "Please don't tell me to go again."

“I couldn’t do that to the person who saved my life. Besides, I don’t think it’d do any good.”

“Thanks!” she said, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Yow!” Kyoya grunted. The bruises from the chain on his neck were still raw, as were the scrapes and road burns on his back.

“S-sorry. Those wounds look bad. They need to be treated.”

“I’m okay. Wherever we camp out tonight, we should be able to find a first aid station. Albeit thirty years old. So, where shall we stay?”

Sayaka looked in the direction that Kyoya seemed to be avoiding. “Isn’t that a hotel over there?” The Keio Plaza Hotel, the lingering effects of the auto-suggestion machine.

“Ah,” Kyoya said hesitantly.

“Let’s stay there. I’m good at lullabies.”

“Lullabies? Who’s gonna listen to them?”

“You.”

Kyoya glared at her. “You plan on sharing a room?”

An awfully prim-sounding question for a guy who’d cop a feel whenever it struck his fancy.

“Sure.” Sayaka nodded and smiled. “Shall we get going? No? If worst comes to worst and we’re in separate rooms, our actions would likely be compromised.”

“You’ve got a point.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can sleep anywhere. I don’t care if you snore or grind your teeth or anything. Won’t bother me.”

“And who exactly do you think’s gonna be doing those things?”

Sayaka pouted, looking positively crestfallen. Kyoya burst out laughing. The same girl who in the midst of a hotel turned into a demonic sea had laughed at his jokes now sulked at an inconsequential aside. He couldn’t resist the delightful juxtaposition of images in his mind.

Still looking clueless, Sayaka managed a small smile.

“Yeah, it doesn’t suit you. Well, the presidential suite? But separate beds.”

Hurrying along the darkening streets to the hotel, Kyoya felt a dark and growing gloom gathering in the pit of his stomach. Monsters and vengeful ghosts were waiting in the forest. And yet his *nenpo* would be fully constrained for the next day. What weighed on his mind all the more was the time he had left to save the president. Two days, max.

That night, they stuffed their stomachs with canned food from the restaurant pantries. And yet lying on the king-size bed in the five-room luxurious presidential suite, couldn’t sleep a wink.

The next morning, walking from the hotel to Chuo Park—only a block away—the two got an up-close look at why the no-go area of the DMZ was a place no sane person should go.

They set out from the ground floor of the hotel, heading straight to the park. Passing beneath Eleventh Street, they were suddenly assaulted by a fierce, cold wind. They raced through the shadows to the other side, but still practically froze to death. It seemed that the vengeful ghosts laid in wait where the sun didn’t directly shine.

Another thirty feet on, the earth caved into a sinkhole the shape of a grinding mortar. At the bottom, the giant jaws of an anteater-like creature snapped at them. It seemed a “normal” living thing, and when Sayaka shot her laser at it, it scurried deeper into the earth without putting up a fight. The prevalence of such animals was likely due to the destruction of the gene research laboratories in Ichigaya.

“We came through that okay!” Sayaka exclaimed with relief, as they climbed out of the hole.

Kyoya frowned. Having to rely on a girl wasn’t something he wanted to make a habit of. As for his own weapon, he’d borrowed a yard-long wooden pole from the hotel. The end of a mop, actually. So that was nothing to write home about either. Unable to use his *nenpo*, he couldn’t even match Sayaka in simple fighting strength. He could even the score by taking the ring for himself, but his pride wouldn’t allow it.

Climbing out of the hole took time, and it was nine o'clock sharp when they emerged onto Twelfth Street, adjacent to the park. They'd left the hotel at seven. It'd taken two hours to walk two city blocks.

Nevertheless, they slipped easily into the haze-shrouded precincts of Chuo Park.

As soon as they stepped from the street into the park, a strange feeling of satisfaction enveloped both of them. The warm sensation permeated their skin, sweeping away the fear and unease.

Sayaka sat down heavily on the grass, as if all the tension had drained from her body. "This is that terrifying place? But it's so beautiful and relaxing."

"That it is," Kyoya agreed.

The broad expanse was covered with green grass and shrubs and trees. There was the fragrant smell of blooming and blossoming life—the dappled sunlight streaming through the treetops—and listening more closely, it seemed that music might even be playing somewhere off in the distance.

And yet a part of Kyoya resisted complete immersion in this world—the senses and intuition imbued in him as a martial artist since the age of two. There was something *off* about this place.

The day before, looking down from the roof of the Sumitomo Building, the park had been shrouded in haze. Besides, why was everything so green in autumn? Knitting his brows, he forcibly suppressed the warm cloud enveloping his mind.

"There's somebody there." Sayaka pointed at one corner of the forest.

Several men and women emerged from the cover of the trees and came toward them. They wore varying kinds of dress and all bore bright smiles on their faces.

"Welcome to this place of repose," a middle-aged man called out. "We're delighted to have you here."

"Place of repose?" said Kyoya. "This is the middle of the DMZ, the no-go zone."

The man spread his hands apart in a gesture that said: *Take a look around*. “It is as you see. Is this such a perilous place? The rest of the world builds fences and walls to isolate us. But danger exists in places other than this. After all, outside the no-go zone, isn’t there a safety zone? A zone of safety as opposed to what?”

He had a point there. A gentle old lady took Sayaka by the hand and helped her to her feet. “Come on. Our country is just a little ways away.”

“Country?”

“A Shangri-La built by those who wander into the forest and say goodbye to the fallen world. And you will soon join our number.”

“Soon?” pressed Kyoya, seeing Sayaka was already completely taken with the giddy mood. “Does joining this club of yours take time?”

The old woman said with an affectionate smile, “Only a little while. Until then, relax and get accustomed to our world.”

The group set off back to the forest. They passed through the thick overgrowth and several minutes later came to a large clearing.

“It’s beautiful,” exclaimed Sayaka.

Even Kyoya couldn’t help opening his eyes wide. The same Shangri-La conceived by the philosophers and scholars of old had been constructed here, of all places.

In the center, a fountain shot a column of clear water towards the deep blue sky. Around the grounds, spilling over with sunlight and green, a great number of people moved about. Young lovers lying on the grass, conversing in soft whispers. Older couples lounging beneath the heavily-laden fruit trees. Children scampering around the fountain. Soft, golden breezes tousled their hair. Sweet, bittersweet tones tickled their ears.

And all this effervescing life glimmered with light.

“Well, how about it?” the old woman asked Sayaka. “You don’t want to leave again, do you?”

“No,” said Sayaka, her expression no different from those of entranced

youngsters around her. Any thoughts of her father or the future of the world fled her mind. Kyoya was no different.

“Then let us be on our way,” a man said, giving Kyoya a friendly shove on the back.

That was what saved them. Although Sayaka had applied a topical antiseptic to his back at the hotel, the wounds were far from healed. The contact of the man’s hand sent a fiery spike of pain into his brain.

The Shangri-La before his eyes changed. The fountain grew cracks and moss and mold. Rotting corpses bobbed in the muddy, rancid water. The green grass turned ash-gray, withered and faded, the fragrant forest into tangled mounds of leafless, skeletal wood.

Kyoya looked down at the ground and sucked in his breath. Those once luscious fruits were weather-beaten skulls.

The residents of this paradise didn’t move. Their pale gaunt faces and sunken bloodshot eyes revealed them as the spirits of the dead—all staring intently at them.

There was no light. The smell of death, of rotting entrails, issuing through their nostrils and the pervasive smothering white haze ruled this world. The refined music became a strange intermittent sound like something breathing. This place of repose was a den of zombies, who beckoned the living into their midst.

The man took in Kyoya’s expression and grinned. “Ah, so you came to your senses.”

Kyoya didn’t answer. Instead, he swung the rod in his right hand against the man’s head. The skull caved in with a sickening crunch. The smile didn’t fade from the man’s pale ghostly face.

“That won’t work. And you’ll never leave the forest. Don’t worry. You’ll soon get used to our company.”

Kyoya struck him in the side. He toppled over, laughing. Kyoya pushed the old woman away and seized Sayaka’s hand. “We’re getting out of here. This is a graveyard.”

Sayaka shook her hand free. “No, I’m going to stay here a little while longer.”

There was no point in arguing. Sensing movement behind him, he turned around. The dead that had so far silently watched them now approached them en masse.

“Sorry!” said Kyoya, jabbing Sayaka in the solar plexus.

She doubled over. He threw her over his shoulder and sprinted off to the heart of the forest. Men and women appeared from within the mist and withered wood, clutching at them. Like Kyoya and Sayaka, they had wandered into the forest and become prisoners of the undead.

Swinging the rod, he could knock down everything in reach, but without imbuing the blows with a destroying *nen*—splitting heads open, crushing necks, bowling them over like tenpins by force alone—they’d soon clamber back to their feet and keep on coming.

“This sure ain’t working.” Kyoya gave up trying to push them back. Searching the map in his mind, he took off for the library. There it was. The remains of the gray building, half of it fallen over. Definitely the library.

A zombie woman appeared out of the mist on his right. He bowled her over with a roundhouse kick and rushed onto the grounds.

“What the hell—!”

The feeling of being pursued instantly left his mind. He couldn’t see the “coin purse,” but in the sky above—or rather, the whole region around them—was not just the Waseda Hotel, but a place that seemed connected through a dimensional void to an entire other world. In the middle of the grounds was a mountain of all those things that—ignoring the normal laws of time and space—had disappeared in the past.

Wooden boxes carved with what looked like Mayan hieroglyphics, gold and gems spilling out of cracks and fissures; a bunch of Native American tepees; several Avenger torpedo bombers; human bones scattered hither and thither. Kyoya had no idea what most of them were or where they came from.

Except for one—overshadowing the rest, the black silhouette of the bow of a ship and its huge gun jutting up from the earth.

“This—this is from an old battleship. But what ship—” The name was carved into the rusted hull. “What does it—*U—ne*—the Unebi!” Kyoya shouted.

During the Meiji Period in 1886, the newest cruiser in the Japanese navy had disappeared without a trace in the South China Sea on a return voyage from France. Kyoya read about it in a book about unexplained phenomena. He certainly never would have guessed it’d been sucked into a pan-dimensional void and deposited here in Shinjuku.

Wait a second. People disappeared too. In the state of Tennessee, five people witnessed the disappearance of one David Lang. Then a young boy named Jimmy who vanished as he jumped off a wall. *Were these bones—?*

Kyoya shook his head. There were a thousand more questions he’d like to ask. But right now Asura was the first and only priority. Where would he even start searching through this pan-dimensional lost and found department?

He felt a great presence behind him and whirled around. And gulped. A dozen yards away stood several hundred zombies, pleading and reproachful looks in their glassy eyes.

“W-what the hell are you doing here? Get lost!” He waved his arms but they didn’t budge. Kyoya wanted to scream and shout. All the zombies did was stand there and stare at him and creep him out.

“Come along,” said a man, beckoning to the flustered Kyoya. “Come back with us,” said a woman missing half of her face. Others chimed in: “*Join us. Become one of us.*”

He did not succumb to the siren’s song largely because of Sayaka’s painful weight pressed against his back. Any other person would have heard nothing but a mother’s softly cooing voice.

“Shut the hell up!” Kyoya shouted in this half-dream state. “Play all the games you like, but this world belongs to the living! This girl and I got responsibilities! And you got a place waiting just for you, so get yourselves the hell there.”

“How disappointing. What a disobedient child.”

“We have no choice. Take him back with us.”

The crowd of zombies nodded in unison and marched into the courtyard. Kyoya tried hiding amidst all the “lost and found” rubbish, but with Sayaka on his back, they soon caught up with him. Pressed back against the hull of the Unebi, waving the wooden rod, kicking and flailing with his arms had no effect.

“*Shit!* Get lost, monsters!”

The rod slapped against the ship with a *clang* like a big gong. The thunderous vibrations echoed around the courtyard and rippled through the air, shaking the frame of the ship itself, and the gaping end of the big gun.

And there was Asura, balanced on the barrel of the gun. The delicate balance lost, it fell down.

The zombies had Kyoya and Sayaka by then, and the mop handle, and were carrying them away. As if descending out of heaven, Asura fell into Kyoya’s hand.

“Long time no see, old friend,” Kyoya said softly.

The hot psychic energy stored in the sword traveled from his palm through every cell in his body. And even rekindled his own languishing *nen*.

He swung Asura downwards. The zombies nearest him turned to dust and disappeared. The rest screamed and scattered. Kyoya twisted his body and landed lightly on his feet. He ran up to the ones bearing Sayaka away and with a single sweep of the sword retrieved her.

The zombies could sense Kyoya’s regenerated life as well. They formed a circle around him at a distance but didn’t come any closer. Kyoya threw Sayaka back over his shoulder and held Asura vertically in front of his chest and closed his eyes to slits.

This was the “white light stance.” As the name suggested, it wrapped him in a brilliant white blaze of light.

Taking his alignment straight through the forest, it would emerge at the outskirts of the park. If memory served, the boundary of the DMZ. But Kyoya’s feet were aimed at the “place of repose.”

Many of the zombies were swept up in the blaze. Even those who simply

touched the wall of light saw their arms disintegrate before they disappeared. In the center of the forest filled with the souls of the dead, a young man acted with a singular resolve, moving inexorably forward. A mere dash of the white *nen* of father and son overwhelmed legions of vengeful ghosts.

“Hold on, all of you,” Kyoya murmured to himself. *True happiness is waiting for you.*

Having retrieved Asura and replenished his psychic reservoirs, he could ascertain the zombies’ energy source, the location of the ringleader binding them to this physical realm.

The breathing sound from before wavered through the clearing. He proceeded to the fountain. Surrounding them at a distance, the zombies screamed. “Stop! That boy is cursed!”

With Sayaka on his back, Kyoya stepped up to the edge of the fountain and looked down into the water. *There it was!*

Like a one-eyed maestro conducting a concert of all the malice and vengefulness in this world—a big eyeball a good three feet in diameter. The eye seemed to be floating by itself in the water. And yet Kyoya’s five senses keenly informed him that attached to it was an enormous entity.

A spirit of the earth born in the magical miasmas of Demon City and possessing the ability to manipulate the spirits of the dead. Lurking beneath Chuo Park—the entire tract of land underlying the center of Shinjuku—it controlled the accursed DMZ. That “music” was the sound of it breathing.

The bloodshot eye glared up at Kyoya. Although only the eye presented itself, its look clearly asked: *What did you come here for?*

Kyoya glared back, uncowed. He raised Asura with a backhand grip and brought it slashing down.

The eye wavered. “*Stop,*” cried the zombies. “*Stop. Stop. Stop.*”

He was about to deliver another blow when a plainly foreign thought stole across his mind: *Wound me and you will never know what you came here to learn.*

“And what would that be, monster?” Kyoya answered in his head.

The hiding place of he who transformed this city into what it is today.

“And how would you know about him?”

I am god of the DMZ. Take one step within its borders and I know everything about you, from your genetic code to the finest details of your memories. Kyoya Izayoi-kun.

His thoughts gradually settled back to normal.

If you promise not to swing that sword, I will tell you where you can find him.

“You know?” Kyoya blurted out loud.

Wake the girl. I will show her the evidence. I will keep the souls of the dead at bay. Though faced by an opponent such as yourself, they could not lay a finger on you. My hypnotic waves are already slackening.

He had no other recourse but to try and see. He had retrieved Asura but still had no idea where the Sorcerer had hidden himself.

Kyoya sat Sayaka down next to the fountain and revived her. She took a deep breath, looked around, gasped, and clung to Kyoya’s knees. They were surrounded by zombies. That she didn’t faint again was a credit to her fortitude.

The thought stole into their heads: *Miss, you surely haven’t forgotten this man?*

The crowd of zombies parted in front of them to the right and left, leaving but one standing there. Sayaka narrowed her eyes, and opened them wide with recognition. “The man who tried to help me in the subway station!”

That is correct. One of those gang members who was going to sell you into the sex trade.

If thoughts could snicker, that was what this one just did. “How would he know where the Sorcerer is hiding?” Kyoya asked suspiciously.

The zombie’s mouth abruptly opened and he spoke in a gloomy voice like a mumbling mist. “I—followed—the monster—that took her—to their—hideout—and was devoured—”

In the moment before he died, this man ran into the DMZ, became entranced by my call, and joined our little band. The thoughts welled up from the earth, spelling out the terms of the dead. If you promise to leave without another word, I will impart the information you need.

Kyoya thought about it for a minute before answering. “And when we are no longer here, what will you do? Continue to construct this kingdom of yours?”

The answer was laden with cruel laughter: *And why not? When souls wander into these precincts, I ask them if they want a true and certain death, or to live forever tormenting the living. They all say they wish to remain and turn the living into their comrades and curse others like themselves. I lend them that power. Isn't this simply a reflection of human desires? Both the DMZ and this idyllic place of repose?*

“I see,” said Kyoya under his breath. “In that case, we have nothing to talk about.”

Stark surprise stirred the thoughts: *Are you mad? You only have so many hours left.*

“And we'll do it relying on our own strength and resources. This world belongs to the living. It is not for zombies and bastards like you to do with as they please.”

Stop!

But faster than the thoughts and the zombies could race at him, Kyoya stabbed Asura into the big eye in the middle of the fountain.

Time and space convulsed. The web of that thing's nerves reached not only into the earth below, but the air above. The sky twisted in pain, spasmed like living flesh. They were eclipsed by a darkness that flashed with electric light and echoed with the thunder of its screams and the cries of the undead.

A violent burst of wind roared against Kyoya as he resolutely stood there, threatening to topple him over.

And was gone a moment later, sweeping it all away. Blessed quiet returned. The mist blanketing Chuo Park evaporated. The autumn sun shone down peacefully on the desolate forest, now illuminating its true form. Not even a

shadow of a zombie remained.

Kyoya jumped down next to Sayaka, who stood there stock still in amazement. “They’re all gone,” she said in a heartfelt voice.

“Damn,” Kyoya said, scratching his head. “Maybe I should have waited until after that thing spilled the beans.”

“No,” said Sayaka, looking at him and shaking her head. “You are not a patient man.”

This young man’s anger and courage in response to the outrageous and the absurd—that took no calculated account of the consequences—could not be any more appealing to her at that moment.

Kyoya averted his eyes and swung Asura, feeling momentarily out of his element. “We found this, at least. Let’s go. This forest is at the outskirts of the DMZ. We can get out through the back. I can’t be certain I dealt that thing a fatal blow. But we should be okay for now.”

They started off at a brisk walk. A few feet later they came across a stout and withered tree, half leaning over. Sayaka stopped.

“What?”

“That man was over there.”

“That man? You mean, the undead one from before?”

“Yes. He was pointing at that trunk.”

Without hearing the rest, Kyoya ran up to the tree and examined the trunk. The vengeful ghosts had left there the feelings of their hearts, carved with their fingernails. The hard bark was covered with words and sentences.

I want to live.

I’ll make them pay.

The more of us, the better.

“Why did he point at this?” Sayaka asked.

Kyoya didn’t have an answer. He knelt down and continued his exacting examination. “Got it!” he exclaimed. He tore off a strip of bark. “That zombie

really came through. Look!”

“At what?”

“See? There’s only one name of a place here.”

Sayaka peered over his shoulder and saw. Among all the curses and lamentations: *Shinjuku station*.

For several moments, the two of them gazed thoughtfully at the signpost and its clearly-stated message.

“He told us before going on his way,” Sayaka said, clearly moved.

“He alone was your ally to the end,” said Kyoya, with a great sense of relief.

They at last knew the location of the enemy. Now they had to scout it out without being noticed by those demon sprites, find a way in, and fight the long-awaited battle. There were two days left. The deadline was three in the morning, the day after tomorrow.

They couldn’t be certain whether the Sorcerer was dead or alive, but probably the latter, along with his two remaining demons. The two of them together—not to mention the Sorcerer himself—were formidable opponents. But Kyoya had wounded them once, and more importantly, they didn’t know their location had been betrayed.

If they could take the time to draw up a battle plan, victory was assured.

And even if the Sorcerer wasn’t dead, Kyoya could tell that he’d hurt him pretty bad in the Big Box department store. Though Sayaka had said something about him dying, a simple death was the last thing he could count on in this city. Still, his soul alone shouldn’t be able to wield as much power as when it had been combined with his body. Kyoya was pretty sure that once the demons were disposed of, he shouldn’t prove that insurmountable a problem.

Kyoya readily dismissed the thought that he might be getting a bit too overconfident.

The sun rose high in the sky. “What time is it?” Kyoya said, glancing at his watch. Two o’clock in the afternoon. “That late. I would have thought it more around noon. We’d better go stake out Shinjuku station.”

“Yes.”

“And find someplace where you can wait.”

“No.”

“Hey.”

“We promised.”

Kyoya grumbled to himself but didn't disagree. The two of them proceeded through the heart of the forest, sliced through the loops of razor wire with Asura, and exited the DMZ.

Part Eight

Kabuki-cho once covered a quarter-mile square area in downtown Shinjuku. It had been home to more than eight hundred bars, restaurants, game rooms, massage parlors, love hotels and nightclubs. Tokyo's red light district and pleasure quarters.

Morning, noon and night, and straight through till dawn, 24/7, Kabuki-cho never slept, and the flow of the young and the restless never ceased. That hadn't changed, though these sleepless nights were of a far more abominable nature.

Taking the Shinjuku station JR Chuo exit, continuing straight down the hill and crossing Yasukuni Avenue, brought them to the one-block main drag known as "Center Street" — the unofficial entrance-way to Kabuki-cho.

Center Street was still there. The buildings weren't. The gaudy, garish soaring structures that once lined the boulevards, and Kabuki-cho's "gateway road" that once impressed so many visitors, were now piles of rubble.

Las Vegas-style neon signs of the Kabuki-cho Stardust Casino—the cooks at the beef bowl emporiums shouting out orders and specials—the kids staring wistfully through the show window of the Shinjuku Gun Shop at the latest weapons on display—it had all disappeared, along with the buildings.

But the Koma Theater—that closed in the end of the Center Street block—was still intact. The walls were cracked. Big holes in the plaster revealed the skeleton of the framework beneath. For some inexplicable reason, the whimsical Devil Quake had not bared its fangs at this temple to the performing arts.

Turning left in front of the Koma Theater and then right revealed a public square. It was once said that "Water Fountain Square" never slept. People gathered there waiting for the theaters to open—The Milano, Odeon, Shinjuku Academy, Shinjuku Joy Cinema.

Joined by drunken frat boys singing at the top of their lungs, annoying the body builder types cruising for a bruising with the pretty boys. Out of the blue, an up and coming pop star would stage an impromptu concert.

A place where anything could happen, and not only in front of the movie theaters. Years later, for anyone who'd ever been there, the Joypack Building—stuffed with every form of entertainment from game rooms to cabarets—lived on in their memories.

In their place, curious prefab units — “Foundation to Finish in Thirty Minutes,” the manufacturer’s slogan was—stood crowded together. The “Disco,” like a stack of soup bowls, every story a dance floor. The “Willow,” so-named as the slightest wind made it sway like a reed. Customers came for the thrill, and on occasion fell to their deaths through the unglazed windows. On the site of the Milano was a dome called the “Battlefield,” where full-body contact fights were staged with blunted weapons.

And everywhere neon signs and billboards advertising their wares and services using the latest projection and holographic technology, so garish as to give anyone a migraine who looked at them for more than ten seconds.

Of course, these buildings weren’t simply not constructed to code. They barely followed the physical laws of the universe. Those who took one step inside Kabuki-cho never noticed. The sheer magic of the place, the enrapturing thrills, washed those fears away.

But they should take a good look around.

Hard to tell if he was a tourist, traveler, or passerby, but a man with a head of hair down to his waist was loitering around Water Fountain Square. The hair wafted up and several strands dropped to the ground. It wasn’t hair, but thousands of insects growing out of his head. They wriggled across the ground to a sleeping vagrant with a liquor bottle in one hand, and slithered into his body through his ears and nose.

A few seconds later, the vagrant’s face paled. With vacant eyes, he came to his feet. These were a species of “mind master” vampire insect particular to Demon City. Having sucked up the blood in a host’s body, they took control of the brain and turned it into a sleep walker, guiding the host to the next victim.

Someone must have reported the outbreak. A yakuza-looking guy dressed all in black ran up and fired a flame thrower, turning the vagrant into a human candle.

Just another day in Demon City. When everything was weird, nothing was.

A teenager with half a cyborg face. A girl straddling an artificial beast, some random mix of bear and wolf and reptile. A gorilla man with the eyes of a dead fish, characteristic of the kind of addict that spent all his time bar-hopping for mutant morphing drugs. A gangbanger dressed in guerilla fatigues, with a caseless sub-machine gun on his hip.

Parading in ones and twos and groups down the sidewalk. All criminals run out of business and out of town in the outside world.

And those who, at a glance, appeared to be respectable citizens in respectable dress. But their severe expressions and the bulges at their sides or on their hips revealed them to be heat ray-packing assassins.

On what passed for the surface roads, frenzied music spilled out of the prefab “flash” clubs. Here a deep water cyborg and a mutant bear man grappled with each other. There a lone yakuza swaggering down the sidewalk was grabbed by another gang hiding in the shadows, dragged down an alley and made a victim of their torture machines, scalpels and needles and various other implements attached to the tips of their hands and feet.

A scream. A giant snake clad in shirt and pants twined around a seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl. The kid who appeared to be her boyfriend fired a pocket rocket on his wrist and blew away the head of the snake man. As they patted their chests in relief, a giant leech the size of a ten-foot-square carpet dropped out of the window of an abandoned building and enveloped them.

The pedestrians in the vicinity didn’t spare them a second glance.

Only idiots walked next to a building if they didn’t know exactly what was lurking inside. Five minutes later, the engorged leech disappeared, leaving only its slippery trail and a pair of desiccated corpses behind.

The cabbie who’d driven them from the Shin-Okubo street market said this was the one place they shouldn’t go, and he wasn’t kidding. The nervous system

of a normal person would shut down after walking a dozen feet, and not long after that, the vultures would drag them into the shadows.

Here were all the reasons Shinjuku was called “Demon City.”

Kyoya and Sayaka had come to Center Street. They’d reconnoitered Shinjuku station, but the edifice and the side buildings were all rubble, and all the entrances were impassable. But seeing that the Sorcerer and his associates could come and go as they pleased, there must be a hidden accessway. What they needed was somebody with detailed knowledge of the station.

“This would seem the perfect place to ask,” said Kyoya, glancing around.

Sayaka didn’t answer. Mouth half-open, she stared amazed at the glorious awfulness of the sights and scenes around her.

His next thought was: *Yeah, I probably should have sent her packing.*

After scouting out the station, he’d made another effort to send her outside the city, but she wouldn’t agree. And when he tried to force the issue, she looked up at him with her big brown eyes and whimpered, “You promised,” and Kyoya buckled.

Naw. She’d be back like a boomerang.

Wishful thinking in any case that they’d happily meet up again the way they had in the DMZ. And if she fell into the hands of those demons, game over. Plus they didn’t have the time. If push came to shove, he’d knock her out and park her someplace safe.

So he let her tag along, though having no idea what was going to happen next.

Drawn along by the currents of the weird and the strange, the two of them ended up at the Koma Theater.

“Where should we go to find a person like that?” Sayaka wondered aloud, coming back to her senses.

“Good question. I suppose we could start with the local hotels. A thousand credits should loosen lips around here. But let’s hang out for a while. What? We won’t do ourselves any good running around like chickens with their heads cut off. We’ve still got all of tomorrow. Don’t rush it.”

Kyoya shut his mouth too late. Sayaka's eyes brimmed with tears. "Hey, hey," he said soothingly. "Just joking. Let's go find us an informed hotelier."

"Yes!" Sayaka smiled.

Kyoya breathed an astonished sigh of relief. This pretty lady had as many facets to her personality as a cut diamond, and could seemingly display them virtually all at once. Eighteen was still too young to grasp all of its complexities. On the verge of tears one moment, back to the playful ingenue the next. Kyoya had to admit she could pretty much push his buttons at will.

That was where the enemy made its move.

Cylindrical magnetic propulsion boosters strapped to their backs, three young men glided over their heads at an altitude of fifteen feet or so.

"Shit!" one of them shouted, patting the back pocket of his jeans. A second later came a hard thump on the ground a couple yards away. "Hey, lady," he called out, stopping in midair. "Some help here? Dropped my wallet. Toss it up, if you don't mind."

The booster's magnetic balancers interacted with the earth's magnetic field, warping the air beneath him like heat rising off a hot road.

Fetch it yourself, buster, Kyoya thought to himself.

But not the kind of thought that would ever occur to Sayaka. She ran over to where the wallet had landed. With a crack and a hum, a black whip-like strand shot down and entwined around Sayaka's waist.

"Damn!"

Kyoya took off running but was a second too late. Sayaka was yanked into the air and into the arms of the punk who'd dropped the wallet. The whip appeared to carry an electrical charge. Her head hung limply down. A fresh new strategy for exploiting a moment of carelessness.

"Heh heh heh. Thanks for the girl, kid." The three punks laughed.

"What do you plan on doing with her? Any funny business, and you and me are going to have words."

But for all his bark, that fifteen feet was a bit too far for him right now.

“Not gonna happen,” said the punk holding Sayaka. “We’re not the ones you should be talking to. Seems there’s bad blood between this girl and our boss. Yoshiko of the Hippopotamus Group.”

For a moment, Kyoya couldn’t place the name. And then it occurred to him. “Ah, that fatso in Shin-Okubo!”

“You’re a quick one. And the girl made our boss lose a lot of face. Since yesterday she’s been in one helluva foul mood. She said to find you two, even if we had to dig up every square inch of downtown Shinjuku.”

Kyoya clucked to himself. An unexpected opponent had made an appearance at exactly the wrong moment. Of course, he should have sent Sayaka home when he could. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty.

“What do you plan on doing with her? You looking for a ransom or something?”

“I’m sure the boss will want to dote on her personally,” the punk sneered. “She can’t bear the existence of any woman cuter than herself. Don’t matter if it’s a hot young chick or some MILF. It’s really kind of sad, the way she abuses them. In the end, she’ll gouge out their eyes and cut off their noses and the like, no anesthetic.”

“Shut it!” Kyoya roared. “Where is the bitch? I’ll give her a diet that’ll cut her weight in half in a few minutes, tops.”

“Nice try. I got nothing to do with you. Looks like you know how to use a sword. Don’t worry, we’re finding you an opponent. You two can have it out. You win, give us a call. Bye now.”

The three sailed off in the direction they’d come, over the block that was home to the old movie theaters. Kyoya tried to follow them, but found that his feet were glued to the ground.

A dozen yards away—in front of what, according to his memories of the map, had once been a pachinko parlor—stood a dark shadow. With confident steps, it slowly strode toward him, radiating an evil vibe quite different from that when he faced off against the demons and the undead.

The kind of killer vibe that only a practitioner of the martial arts could

possess.

The shadow stopped six feet in front of him. Even in the already strange precincts of Kabuki-cho, it was strikingly strange. Or perhaps even more strikingly *normal*.

The man was dressed like a samurai. More precisely, the kind of samurai found in 3D midnight movies: a traditional shaved pate and top knot; a “bat wing” *haori* with short, wide sleeves favored by the Edo Period samurai; straw *waraji* sandals; and long and short swords tucked into the waistband.

And on his face, a particularly distinguishing characteristic.

So it's him!

In a flash, Kyoya saw through the facade. *An impersonation android*. An android with an implanted personality. Kyoya recalled seeing a show on television that followed the manufacturing process through to the test runs. Using human data extracted from archives and a wide swath of information sources, the characteristics of a person, the substance of his mind and soul, were calculated and compiled with the known biometric parameters to create an android reproduction with a high degree of fidelity.

In a sense, the science of robotics had produced a way of resurrecting the dead.

The original intent was to create actors for completely realistic blockbuster movie productions. But the mercenary possibilities presented by extraordinarily skilled heroes lacking any will of their own encouraged criminal organizations to channel the technology onto the black market. The gunfighter Wyatt Earp facing off against the legendary ninja Sasuke Sarutobi, or Hercules wrestling judo champion Shiro Saigo—it took the concept of “ultimate fighting” to a whole new level.

Production of these androids was currently on hold. This model was the property of the Hippopotamus Group.

The warrior standing before Kyoya was something more than an electronic twin, the sculptured amalgamation of large-scale integrated circuitry and artificial bone and muscle. The proof was that very human bloodlust, that he

hadn't felt to this point, no matter what the strength, shape or form of the opponent.

The residents of Kabuki-cho who blithely shared the streets with the worst murderers and thieves stood still in amazement, sucked in their breaths, and watched to see what would happen next.

The warrior settled into a fighting stance, his left foot forward, the sword held high over his right shoulder.

A strange thought occurred to Kyoya. No matter the genius of swordsman resurrected to stand before him, as long as his skill set was limited to what was humanly possible, he couldn't match Kyoya's *nenpo*.

And yet Kyoya couldn't help wanting to test his skills against him, without resorting to his *nenpo*. This once in a lifetime chance to meet the best fighter of an era on the field of combat and prove himself would stir the blood of any young athlete.

Thoughts of Sayaka and the fate of the world faded away. He raised Asura to the *en garde* position. "Kyoya Izayoi is honored to stand in your presence," he said. "Tell me your name."

"I am Mitsuyoshi Jubei Yagyu."

The one-eyed warrior. The most famous swordsman of the early Edo Period.

The sight of such a bizarre duel was unique even by Kabuki-cho's standards. In the center of an asphalt ring formed by the ruins of the desolate buildings, surrounded by people whose dress and manner could be mistaken for that of madmen, the two fencers faced off against each other.

The one was undoubtedly a samurai warrior in the prime of life. The other a jeans-wearing kid. Both were radiating bursts of terrifying energy that made the onlookers turn their heads as if leaning into a strong gale.

Everything else in the world seemed to come to a halt. Everyone there felt the tension approaching the breaking point. And the moment it shattered—

"*Yaa—!*" With a shout, the android embodiment of Jubei Yagyu attacked Kyoya, sword raised high over his head, leaping across the six-foot distance

without the slightest indication of his next action.

“*Haa!*” Answering with a scream of his own, Kyoya barely managed to check the blow, his father’s *nen* sealed inside Asura. For now, it was nothing more than a wooden sword.

The two blades came together with a collision strong enough to almost dislocate Kyoya’s shoulders. The “Miike Tenta” sword, a striking reproduction of Jubei’s favorite, dug halfway into Asura. Then a moment later swung laterally at his torso.

Dodging the blow, Kyoya made a big backwards jump. *A simple parry took all my strength*, he thought. *This isn’t a guy I have the skill to defeat*. Though fending off two attacks already was something only a prodigy could have accomplished.

Jubei pressed forward. Behind Kyoya was the mountain of rubble in front of the Koma Theater. He had no more room to retreat. His death became a real possibility.

A cruel smile of victory rose to Jubei’s lips as he thrust forward with inhuman speed. And met only thin air. Kyoya had vanished. A blue slash of lightning ran across the flash of steel, followed by the crunch of breaking bone,

The crowds gasped. The expected victory slipped from his grasp. Jubei Yagyu slumped to his knees holding his right shoulder. Instead of being speared through and through, Kyoya rose up from the ground.

As soon as he’d sensed the straight-ahead thrust, Kyoya spread his legs wide and tumbled forward, slamming his left heel against Jubei’s right shoulder. Realizing that his sword was useless to him—and in the few tenths of a second after realizing that Jubei was going for a thrusting move—he’d released an explosion of Shorin Kenpo footwork.

Had Jubei slashed horizontally or vertically with his sword, Kyoya would have parted neatly in two, vertically or horizontally.

The android Jubei had been imbued with the personality and martial skills of the real Jubei. Except that nothing in Jubei’s life or the android programming suggested that in the moment of extremis, an opponent might use his feet instead

of a sword.

Chen Yuanbin, the Ming Dynasty founder of kenpo, traveled to Japan during Jubei's lifetime, so he should have at least witnessed such a move. However, this may have been the first time Jubei—or his avatar—faced an opponent with the skills necessary to deliver such a kick in a downwards trajectory.

The difference between the person unfamiliar with kenpo and the person who was—even while coughing up blood—was the difference between victory and defeat.

Yes! The underdog by an upset!

In any other similar situation, Kyoya might have served up a dose of *nen* and knocked him flat on his back, or sprang back and waited for his opponent to come at him again. But the sense of urgency interrupted in that moment. Diverting his attention to Sayaka's predicament, Kyoya left Jubei there and started off at a run.

He felt a shock in his flank and grunted, a feral cry. *Damn!* he cursed in his heart. The fiery sensation shot through his torso. On his knees, with the arm attached to the broken collarbone, Jubei had buried the tip of the long sword into Kyoya's side.

Take away the electronic guts, and the body of an impersonation android was formed from a combination of polymer bones and mechanical muscles whose strength could be altered based on the context. Turning into the person it was emulating and playing the part was not something the metal and plastic of a run-of-the-mill android could pull off.

In other words, change the context, and an impersonation android could be easily broken in an accident, turning it into so much scrap. That was why a simple kick, no *nen* involved, broke its so-called bones.

Kyoya hadn't imagined that, heavily damaged, and with the arm attached to the broken bone, it could deliver such a blow. The real Jubei might well have been such a fighter.

"Son of a bitch!"

Jubei's one electronic eye focused on him, Kyoya squatted on the sidewalk,

hand pressed against his side to staunch the flowing blood. The android calmly raised the blood-stained sword.

The scene in front of him grew dark. The ferocity of the thrust had robbed him of the willpower even to summon the reserves of his psychic energy. *I ain't dead yet. Throw in the towel now and I'll never look her in the face again.* That was the foremost thought on his mind.

The android Jubei advanced on the unconscious, unmoving teenager—the wooden sword tightly grasped in his right hand—with steady steps, the killer instinct spilling out of his being.

“Unbelievable.” A quiet statement filled with surprise. “Wounded that badly, losing blood, and yet still breathing. I understand what a trained and disciplined body can do, but this is a spiritual strength way beyond the normal.”

“Is he conscious?” somebody else asked in a concerned voice.

“We have treated him the best we can. He should awaken soon. Though he still needs a good two weeks of bed rest.”

“Yes.”

The sterilizing lights dimmed. The two gazed down at the operating table. The operating room was stocked with the latest medical equipment and automated surgical tools, the kind found in the best hospitals in Tokyo. Not as grand as the Sorcerer's, but in the same neighborhood.

Transparent scanner hoods covered the operating table, linked to medical computers, recording the patient's vital signs. The operation had just ended.

“Hmm,” said the first speaker.

“What?”

“The anesthetic is wearing off. Look at the spike in brain waves and metabolic activity. I am most impressed. This is some sort of superman. He should be waking up any second. Three—two—one—”

Kyoya opened his eyes, and focused on the faces peering down at him. “Sayaka-san, are you all right? What in the world—”

Sayaka resisted the impulse to cling tightly to him and looked at the tall man

behind her. “He came to your rescue. And those gangsters took me to their headquarters and were about to start torturing me when he charged in and drove them off like some sort of magician.”

“As I promised, we meet again.” A slight smile came to the white face framed in black.

“Doctor Mephisto? What are you doing in a place like this?”

The impression made in the Musashi Miyamoto bar in Waseda was not that deep, and the anesthetic was still wearing off, and he hadn’t completely digested what Sayaka was saying—so he jumped to the conclusion that he was the one who’d snatched Sayaka. He sat up in a fury. The scanner hoods retracted automatically.

“Don’t try to get up!” Sayaka said, grabbing him. “You misunderstand. This man saved me. And treated your wounds as well.”

The anger faded from Kyoya’s features. His mind returned to a rational state. “After I got stabbed by that Jubei Yagyu android, this quack—no, sorry, scratch that—you patched me up? This your hospital? I suppose you’re a real doctor or something?” His thoughts springing back to life, he added, “Yeah, and what happened to Jubei Yagyu?”

“He has been disposed of,” Mephisto softly answered. “This is my home. That is all you need to know about me. Can you move?”

“Ah—” Kyoya also sensed that Sayaka was stifling a growing sense of impatience and unease. “So what happened? Wait a second, did the deadline pass while I was unconscious?”

“No.” Sayaka shook her head emphatically. “Not yet. But it’s now midnight of the thirteenth!”

Her voice was strained and her eyes brimmed with tears. Still half asleep, Kyoya shrugged his shoulders and said, “Huh?” Then his eyes opened wide. “Say what! We entered the DMZ on the tenth, spent a night and left a day later. Today should be the eleventh. What, did you think you had a whole day to kick back at the hospital?”

“In any case, it is the thirteenth, and the clock runs out today,” Mephisto said

severely. “The young lady has explained everything to me. Upon leaving the DMZ, you should have counted the days more precisely. Because of the Devil Quake, time takes on a different flow there, moving faster than normal. What you experienced as one day there took two here.”

“You don’t say,” said Kyoya. “When I looked at my watch I thought something was out of sync. Interesting. Sort of like Urashima Taro meets Rip Van Winkle. Huh.”

And then the magnitude of what had happened sunk in. A worried expression came to his face and he jumped off the operating table. “Ow!” Kyoya bent over, holding his side.

Sayaka lent him her shoulder. “You can’t move around like that. With a wound like that, it’s amazing you’re still alive!”

“Don’t worry about me. I only need to hold up for three hours more. Hey, Paleface, your surgical skills good for three hours?”

“Where do you plan on going?”

“She told you, didn’t she? Wherever those guys are hiding out.”

“Your wounds have been sutured, but the blood loss was considerable. I doubt you would get a dozen yards before collapsing. Besides, they surely know the deadline is tonight and would be anticipating your arrival. You would be walking to your own death.”

Kyoya clapped his hands. “Good point. We were looking for somebody in the know. Would you happen to know how to sneak into Shinjuku station without attracting a lot of attention?”

“I would.”

He answered so readily that Kyoya almost thought he was joking. “Where? Tell me,” he demanded.

Mephisto asked wryly, “Why rush to your death? What in this world is so important that it is worth risking your life? It is said that in the history of mankind, a mere four hundred and thirty-seven years could be described as peaceful and relatively free of warfare. We do love to fight and kill. Izayoi-kun,

if a terrible thing were summoned this night from the depths of the earth, casting the world into fear and despair, would not the human heart find that a more appropriate place?”

Kyoya didn't answer. He hobbled over to the dressing screens and changed into his street clothes. They'd been washed and sterilized while he was being operated on. Asura was leaning against the wardrobe.

“Probably,” he said as he dressed. “But I'm not going to call off the game because of rain until I actually see it falling. I've met all kinds since coming to this city. They're not all bad. Besides, once I start a job, I finish it. No mulligans, no do-overs.”

“For the good of the world, eh? The anachronistic hero in the flesh.”

“Sorry, but nothing that highfalutin.” He glanced at the girl's face, on the verge of tears. “Wait here, okay? And no funny business this time.”

The look on her face betrayed her hurt. He knew she'd been planning on accompanying him. The destruction of the world was imminent. The only champion left in the fight was critically wounded. He'd woken from a dead sleep only minutes before.

For her father's sake, for the sake of the planet, she wanted to be there at the scene of the final battle. She opened her mouth but couldn't say the words. She'd hated him the first time they met, but since then he'd fought the denizens of the Demon World by himself and suffered grievous injuries to save her—that alone engendered in her inexpressible feelings of gratefulness.

Therefore, she would go. As the daughter of the “holy man” in charge of the World Federation, she bore a powerful sense of responsibility more to the fate of the world than to her own father, while possessed of a courage bestowed by her thoughts of him. With these two firmly in hand, she was determined to proceed to the Armageddon in Kyoya's place.

Kyoya read those intentions and put his foot down firmly. “I'm going. Where's this secret passageway?”

“And if I chose not to tell you?”

“You won't enjoy the consequences.”

“And that would be what, precisely?”

“This.”

Kyoya swept his right foot at Mephisto’s legs with a swift, slashing kick. Except it was Kyoya’s eyes that bugged out. Without appearing to budge an inch, Mephisto dodged the attack—or rather, leaned just a hair’s breadth away from the arc traced by his foot.

No matter how powerful the blow, no matter how close it came, a missed kick was no better than a child’s. In the martial arts, properly anticipating an opponent’s skill and range and shifting just out of range was a critical skill. For even the best, it was measured in inches. Mephisto had honed it down to tenths of an inch. Though the wound in his side dampened Kyoya’s reflexes, not even Jubei Yagyu could have evaded that kick.

Kyoya felt a cold trickle of fear down his back. He shifted to a left foot forward stance. He purged the emotion from his face.

“That’s enough,” said Mephisto, his countenance all the more passive. “If you wish to go that badly, then go. There is no cure for foolishness. Leaving the operating room, there will be an elevator in front of you. Take it to the ground level. Goodbye.”

“Hey.”

“Ah, yes. You’re still waking up from the anesthetic. I thought things might turn in this direction, so while your wounds were being treated, the route was implanted in your memories. Concentrate.”

Kyoya dubiously turned his thoughts inward, on the secret way into the Shinjuku station. By then, enough of the drugs had cleared his system that the path rose effortlessly to his mind’s eye.

“I got it,” Kyoya said, with an alacrity that must have taken a little wind out of Mephisto’s sails. He nodded and grabbed Asura. Heading for the door, he said over his shoulder, “Oh, yeah. Two favors to ask. As you seem to be in a helping mood, I’d appreciate you keeping an eye on the girl until three o’clock. If I return before then, fine. If not, make sure she gets back to civilization. Although there’s no saying what will become of this city then. One more thing, that mask

you gave me when we first met—would you have a spare? That fat lady and her henchmen will probably still be out for blood.”

“You’re just flying out of here, making demands as you go? You are a presumptuous lad,” Mephisto said with a thin smile. “I shall take the girl under my wing. As for the fat lady, we have come to an agreement.”

“An agreement?” Kyoya said, raising his brows. “Like how? Word is, that bunch has a lot of clout. Anybody who knows her—no, don’t tell me—the two of you are an item?”

“Please.” For the first time Mephisto plainly frowned. “I happened to be in the square when her associates exposed the young lady. After disposing of the so-called fencing master android and bringing you here, I dropped in at their headquarters and retrieved the girl.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Sayaka said with a constrained expression. “He burst in and said that I was a friend of his. And all those bad guys turned a shade paler.”

Kyoya shook his head disbelievingly. “Mephistopheles was definitely one of the bad guys. You wouldn’t be the real thing, perhaps?”

Mephisto said with a blank expression, “In any case, they have promised to leave you alone. That should serve your purposes, no?”

“I suppose. Who the hell are you, anyway?”

“He’s a doctor,” Sayaka interjected. “The reception room upstairs is filled with the sick and the wounded. Every day, this man and his robot assistants work late into the night treating people.”

“Huh,” said Kyoya, admiration mixed with lingering doubts. “You’re really a doctor?”

“I do resemble one. However, I only take the general public as patients. The ruffians are free to kill each other at a whim, but when others get involved in their squabbles, the pitiful results cannot be ignored.”

“Huh,” Kyoya said again. “A humble do-gooder, if you do say so yourself.”

“You are one to cut to the chase.”

“I suppose. It puts my mind at ease. Well, I’m off.”

Kyoya grinned at them. Sayaka, to be sure, but even Mephisto was starting to grow on him. The way he'd easily dodged that kick of his had earned him a lot of points. The way he'd anticipated Kyoya's next move and implanted the memory of the train station. For either reason or both, Kyoya felt toward him something approaching friendship.

“Kyoya-san.”

Sayaka called out to him in a tearful voice. She still wanted to go with him. For some reason, this was the one fight he'd have to face alone. Their eyes met for a moment. The moment passed. Kyoya turned and without a backwards glance headed through the door.

The door closed behind him. The black-clad young man and the beautiful young woman stood there gazing at the cold steel door. One as impassive as ever. The other containing a thousand emotions in her heart. From then to the end of time.

“The president's pulse is slowing.” The doctor stared intently at the display of the medical control panel. “His blood pressure is declining rapidly.”

The pensive faces of the Federation High Council and the doctors assembled in the observation room turned as one to the largest of the monitors that showed a full 360 view of the president's hospital room.

As the president lay on the bed, a look of pain clearly colored his features. His already pale skin now looked almost transparent, which only served to accentuate the “liveliness” of the loathsome handprint on his neck.

“Look.” One of the council members pointed to a close-up of the president's neck on another monitor. He said in a terrified whisper, “The handprint is moving.”

Ripples ran across the surface of the black stain as three of the fingers reached further around the president's neck.

“What will the Master do?”

All eyes focused on the white-haired man sitting on the floor in the middle of the hospital room. Since the attack, Master Rai hadn't left the president's side, spending the days in fasting and prayer, sitting in the lotus position, hands

folded across his abdomen, eyes closed. His countenance betrayed no haggardness or anguish or fretfulness, though it had grown paler.

“Is the president all right?” the vice-president asked.

“I do not know,” said the doctor. “But there is nothing more that we can do. To be honest, the president has persevered until today completely thanks to the Master. Compared to his psychic powers, our ESP treatments have only taken the first step. We have left everything up to him. However—”

“However—what?”

“Though my ESP powers are not strong, I have sensed the Master’s *nen* waning little by little but inexorably—”

His voice trailed off as well. They all stood in front of the monitors, the silence of death etched on their faces. The Master had also grasped the nature of the president’s accelerating decline, but his psychic powers and his ability to check it were reaching their limits. The missile attack of the day before had weakened him as well.

Time is running out, Kyoya. Two and a half hours. The enemy is conducting the summoning ritual even now.

With a heart like still waters, he called out to the youth so many thousands of miles away. The Master felt the world—if not the universe itself—being wrapped in a strange kind of foreboding.

Closing his eyes and concentrating his *nen* through silent prayer, the Master could sense the boundary between the mortal world and the Demon World. That boundary was steadily retreating toward the mortal world as the territory of blackness on the other side spread.

Deeper within the darkness, from the space into which the coldness and blood and loathing erupted like an icy geyser, myriads of perverse beings cried in ecstatic joy as they slowly invaded this earthly realm, engaging in a battle between good and evil that only the Master and those with similar powers of thought were aware of.

The mortal world was losing.

The first underground level of Shinjuku station. The “My City” mall above was thoroughly wrecked from the first to the eighth floors. Cracks ran across the ceiling in all directions, but this wide space mostly held its original shape and form, along with the rows of neatly arranged turnstiles, the shuttered shops, the empty ticket booths.

This was a terminal for the municipal subway system and the JR, Keio, and Odakyu commuter lines. Shinjuku station had once been visited by several hundred thousand riders a day. Except for government inspectors examining the damage, no one had come here since the Devil Quake. And then even Shinjuku’s residents forgot about it, leaving the once grand building, they imagined, to slumber peacefully in the quiet dark.

The reality was anything but.

In the decades since the Devil Quake, a fierce sense of will had brewed inside the station. In the dead center of the concourse leading from turnstiles at the east entrance to the west exits was an altar constructed of unknown materials. From the black shadow crouched before it came low but powerful incantations.

Wearing a black mantle, the Sorcerer, Rebi Ra.

The strange surgery was done. But then why would his metaphysical soul be wearing a very real cloak? In any case, there he was, and on the floor next to him was the Devil Sword. Shinjuku station was the true lair of the Sorcerer, the headquarters of the war to transform the rest of the world into a Demon Realm.

Behind the altar, in the concourse leading to the west exits, was an array of flickering lights. Thirteen black candles were arranged in a circle nine feet in diameter. The flames fluttered, but not according to any natural breezes flowing through the station.

In the very center of the circle of candles, a wind erupted out of the hard cold floor and raced through the gloom. Every time the flames trembled, the wind threw off another wave of noxious, sulfurous stench.

The mutant forces transforming the mortal world spread forth from the ground in the center of the circle.

“It’s coming,” said the Sorcerer. “Soon. This night for certain.”

Undergirded by an overwhelming power and ecstatic joy, this was nevertheless a somehow human voice. But different from before.

“No one shall interfere. Kaki—prepare to confront any and all enemies.”

A ball of fire rose up behind the Sorcerer and changed into Kaki wearing a monk’s habit.

“Rest assured, any trespassers will be detected at once. I have cast a web of darkness across every entrance and passageway. Continue your prayers without reserve.”

He spoke more respectfully than before—such was the intensity of the magical might and energy that the Sorcerer now contained within him.

“Where is Suiki?”

“He took the girl’s shadow and went to search for her and the boy. Patience is not that demon’s forte. And now that temper is sweetened with revenge. Imagining the retribution when he finds them makes even my fires turn cold. Assuming that they live—”

“You said that they entered the DMZ?”

“Yes. After escaping Shin-Okubo, using shadowmancy they were trailed there. No matter how strong his *nen*, the odds of him exiting such a danger zone without his protecting sword are thin.”

“That is certainly true. And yet I cannot help wondering why he deliberately went in there—” As if lost in thought, the Sorcerer left off the rest of the question. Not even he had contemplated that the pan-dimensional void might find an outlet there.

“My state of apprehension has not been quelled. Be on your guard. Now go.”

“Yes.”

Kaki turned back into a ball of fire and disappeared.

“Apprehensions, eh? What do I have to be afraid of? Even combining their forces together, that father and son cannot lay a finger on me now.” His confident laughter seemed to increase the force of the wind, and riding on the magical miasmas shot around the station’s interior. “Two more hours. And then

it will all be over. This world will become a second Demon Realm.”

The Sorcerer raised his head. What manner of unearthly face was this—inside the hood swirled his soul like a lingering mist and deeper in was the “face”: blue-white electric eyes, bared artificial teeth, an electronic brain encased in a lustrous black skull, like that of a corpse from which the muscles and skin had been scraped away. The face of a cyborg.

It was two twenty-five in the morning when Kyoya reached the underground tunnel. It had once been Shinjuku’s subterranean promenade. Leaving Mephisto’s “hospital” — located in the former but still-standing Shinjuku ward government building—his implanted memories led him to the one remaining undamaged entrance-way on Yasukuni Avenue. Again, his “memories” told him that every other access route had been destroyed during the Devil Quake. At the back of the sub-promenade was a passage to the station.

This subterranean city had once boasted hundreds of shops, equipped with the latest smoke and fire detectors and backup power generators, but it too was helpless before the power of the Devil Quake.

Kyoya gazed around at the tragic reminders of that time. The concrete had torn away from the roof, exposing the steel girders. The floor was cracked and broken. Nor had they been spared the ravages of fire. The shops here and there were charred and blackened inside and out.

There weren’t any lights. Kyoya’s keen night vision guided him through the inky shadows as surely as if it were as bright as day. After a dozen or more twists and turns, his “memories” whispered that this was the place. Turning left and going straight brought him to a flight of stairs and escalator leading to the station.

But as Kyoya sprinted up in a gust of wind, a transparent glass-like wall towered before him, at least ten feet high.

“Hoh. Must be the demonic powers of Suiki at work. The escalator and stairs turned to sheets of water and sucked into the concrete. What a tricky bastard you are.”

The original intent must have been to keep at bay the vagrants and the homeless who made the underground their home. Scale the top and the way to

the station should be clear. No one else up till now would have bothered. To begin with, there was nothing left in the station worth the trouble. Anybody else who made it this far would have given up rather than waste the effort.

Kyoya was already feeling the fatigue in his shoulders and the pain in his side. He checked his watch. Two thirty-three. He didn't have any more time to waste here.

"Well, over the top we go," he said to himself, and crouched and jumped. He grunted as a hot stab of pain shot through his side. But he maintained his form as he landed on top of the wall.

Corridors far wider than the subterranean passageway reached to his right and left. *Right*, his "memories" told him.

Kyoya took off running. He knew the wound was bleeding inside. "Son of a bitch! Stop it!"

He channeled his thoughts to the veins and arteries and cauterized the flow of blood. And then something else stopped as well—his legs.

Thirty feet in front of him in the pitch black was a thick concentration of demonic miasma. Flames shot up. And yet the light from the fire didn't extend beyond the flames themselves.

"You still alive, boy?" said Kaki, the flames collecting into a human form. "I'm impressed that you made it this far."

"At least you could pretend to be glad to see me after all the trouble I went to, to surprise you," Kyoya quipped with pretend displeasure, as he brought Asura to the fore and positioned himself for the inevitable attack.

"The entire station and its grounds are wrapped in the darkness of the Demon Realm. No one can take a single step inside without me knowing about it."

Kyoya snapped back in a no-less cheerful voice, "Some sort of radar, eh? Even demon sprites keep a few aces up their sleeve."

But his physical condition was sagging to the point where he was ready to fall over. The excruciating pain in his side unceasingly assaulted the rest of his body, sending chills and cold sweats through him in nauseating waves. Nevertheless,

he had no choice but to focus every nerve on the foe in front of him. He could numb the pain, but he could not spare even that much of his psychic powers.

“Laugh while you still can, boy. I will scald you with the fires of the Demon Realm down to the marrow of your bones.”

“Answer me this first. Where’s your boss-man?”

“Up the stairs behind me and to the left. Inside the station. Not that you’ll ever get there.”

The two of them fell silent. The tension welled up in the dark hallway. There once was a time when millions of commuters passed through Shinjuku station every day. And not a one of them had ever anticipated that one day, right where they walked, a demon sprite and a young fencer would be facing off in a fight to the finish.

Kyoya was carrying the handicap in this contest. There was the wound in his side. No matter what, he had to resolve the issue in less than thirty minutes. He didn’t know the extent of Kaki’s powers. He’d defended himself against Kaki in Shin-Okubo plaza, but the enemy had been caught off guard, sparing him the full brunt of the attack. Even if he wanted to go on the offensive, Kaki wouldn’t give him an opening, and he couldn’t afford to make the slightest mistake. Cold beads of sweat—quite apart from the pain—coursed down his cheeks.

On the other hand, Kaki was equally a prisoner of his fears. The psychic energy pouring from the tip of Asura twined around him like strands of rope. The powers the boy possessed made him a formidable enemy even in the Demon Realm.

What manner of man is this, enough to give the Sorcerer reason to fear?

The two remained silent. Another sound grew louder in the corridor. The pipes in the ceiling seemed to shake loose. Several seconds apart, drops of water fell onto the floor. Like a while ago, forming a puddle a foot and a half in front of Kyoya.

Kyoya quickly lowered Asura and planted the tip in the center of the puddle. As if taking that as a signal, Kaki transformed his body into a column of fire. The cold flames—that could turn the body and soul into ashes—grew five

fingers and roared straight at Kyoya.

And was repelled by a fierce cry. “*Nenpo, rising dragon!*”

Kyoya flipped up the tip of Asura. The inch-deep puddle rose up before him in a column of water. Fire met water with a hiss of steam and came to a halt.

Kaki smiled confidently. A moment later, the blocked fire changed into many smaller tendrils, bursting apart and wrapping around the water, then coming at Kyoya from all directions.

“*Yaa—!*” Instead of fire, a gasp of fright and surprise issued from Kaki’s mouth.

The towering waterspout poured down from the tip of Asura onto Kyoya’s head and like a living creature wrapped around him, soaring and crashing to earth very much like a dragon. The raging steam again billowed up, extinguishing the tendrils of fire.

“W-what—is—this—!”

Sensing defeat, Kaki turned back into a fire sprite and turned to flee. From the direction of the erupting steam came another command: “*Nenpo, surging waves!*”

Kaki turned and saw the young man, eyes tightly shut in quiet concentration, bring down the sword with a sweeping motion. The roiling water burst from the tip like a geyser and rushed at him, the wave imbued with the evil-crushing psychic energy of both father and son.

The demon gagged and gurgled. The screams of its death throes warbled down the empty corridor and died away. Kyoya stood there, Asura in his hand. The cavernous space returned to the same stillness before the duel began. The only difference was that every puddle of water was gone.

“We did it, Dad. One more monster to go.”

Together with the pain in his side, he felt as if the death match had wrung the last ounce of physical and mental energy out of him. He steadied himself to keep from falling over and took off running. He glanced at his watch. Twenty-five minutes left.

The stairs came up on his left. Taking the steps two at a time, he entered the main station concourse. Points of light flickered beyond the ticket booths.

There it is.

He vaulted over the turnstiles and ran closer. A black silhouette crouched before the altar. A sickly breeze struck him in the face, carrying omens of that thing's ascendance.

Kyoya stopped behind the silhouette. Pouring all of his *nen* into Asura, he called out, "We meet again. But for the last time. Release the curse on the president. If you don't—"

The answer came in a blast of evil energy, and a blow from a mighty sword that sent sparks through his brain and made him see stars. The impact left his whole body numb and wrenched Asura from his grasp and sent it clattering across the ground. The war of light and dark that erupted when Asura and the Devil Sword clashed favored the darkness.

"Who the hell is this? Not the Sorcerer from before!"

Seized by an almost crushing sense of dismay. But still managing a backwards flip through the air to retrieve Asura.

"Hoh! And if I don't release the spell, what will you do?"

The Sorcerer slowly got to his feet. Knowing that he'd made such a furious assault from his knees, swinging the sword without breaking a sweat, made Kyoya tremble in his heart.

"What will you do? Cut me in two? You cannot kill me. Having died once, a human being cannot die again."

The Sorcerer shed his black cloak. Kyoya couldn't help gaping. *What, this a human being?*

At first glance, he looked like a cyborg with the skin stripped away. The obsidian alloy metal frame, studded with metabolic regulation mechanisms, pushed the darkness aside like water and towered over him. The mechanical heart beating in its chest and the other body parts were connected by circulation pipes and electrical conduits from a nuclear fusion furnace in its abdomen

through its spinal cord.

It was like the life-sized anatomical model in Kyoya's high school science room had suddenly come to life.

The Sorcerer had been reconstituted as a cyborg? No, observing the pale phosphorescing light cast off by the mist that encased the mechanical demon's body, Kyoya understood the true nature of the beast.

"Bastard—after you died, you encased your soul in a cyborg's shell."

Black laughter shook the concourse. "Just as I should have expected from Izayoi's son. What good eyes you have."

The Sorcerer—his "spirit cyborg" — bared his artificial teeth in a grotesque smile, pointed his Devil Sword at Kyoya and marched toward him. Pushed back by the demonic wind as the robot monster powered up, Kyoya had no choice but to retreat.

A battle was simultaneously unfolding in another location. As soon as Kyoya left, guided by Sayaka's shadow, Suiki stole into Mephisto's operating room.

Perhaps taking it for granted that the world would become part of the Demon Realm that night, the figure clothed in the monk's habit returned to its original nature. A multitude of white tentacles spilled forth from its collar and sleeves, wriggling and writhing.

Guided by the girl's shadow crawling across the ground, they made a grand entrance at the ground floor, throwing the waiting room into an uproar and sending the patients fleeing.

"Cowards, all. You will never find safety in this world, no matter where or how far you run. Come three o'clock and wives will set upon their husbands, parents will kill their children. But I shall not rest unless I first draw and quarter that boy and girl with these hands."

Suiki followed the shadow's trail with his burning, hateful eyes. "I was sure they had died in the DMZ, but unleashed the shadowmancer just to be sure. And now it shall pay off. Ah, in the basement. Wait there, my darlings. I shall soon arrive."

From the monitors, Sayaka and Mephisto were already aware of the commotion. Suiki began descending the stairs.

“It seems you have a guest. Some creature called Suiki.”

Sayaka nodded. “This is good news.”

“How is that?”

“If this creature is here, that means Kyoya-san must contend only with one.”

“I find that nothing worth celebrating,” Mephisto said, with obvious displeasure. He waved his right hand.

Descending the stairs, Suiki was pierced by a particle beam weapon embedded in the walls. He calmly reached toward the wall with his tentacles. The wall grew half-transparent, frothed and bubbled, and turned into a sheen of water. The stream of particles stopped like a crimped hose, and Suiki proceeded on his way.

The demon sprite was bombarded in succession by lasers, ultrasonic waves and chemical weapons. He cut all of them off from their sources in a matter of seconds.

“Physical deterrents won’t work here. This living creature doesn’t follow the natural laws of this world. Refurbishing these government offices cost a hundred million. That thing is causing an awful lot of damage.”

“I’ll see to it that you are compensated,” Sayaka responded calmly and apologetically. “Just give me the invoice.”

“You certainly are a resourceful young lady.” Mephisto smiled, though it seemed more the result of restraining outright laughter.

“I try to be.”

“I’ll have my accountants tend to it later. For the time being, we should address the problem at hand.”

“I concur.”

“That fellow is being guided by your shadow. Once being a part of you, it now seeks to unite with you again and so pursues you. Meaning that no matter where

you go, it will follow. The only remaining option is to stand and fight.”

“But Kyoya-san is the only one who can defeat them.”

“Ah, yes. A particularly common failing of the female sex is to believe that love conquers all. Which is not to say it does not have its uses.”

“W-what?” Sayaka blushed. “I am not Kyoya-san’s girlfriend!”

“So you say. Come along.”

Mephisto left the operating room. Sayaka followed him. They took the elevator to the second underground level. Mephisto opened the door to the room immediately adjacent to the lobby. The fairly wide space was covered from floor to ceiling with machines and tools. Sayaka recognized some of the computers, translation machines and monitors, but as for the rest she didn’t have the slightest idea what they did or how they worked.

The room was wrapped in a dusky silence. It seemed a most appropriate abode for this black-clad young man. His personal research laboratory.

Mephisto stood in front of a huge machine in the back and picked up what appeared to be a silver gun.

“Completed it just yesterday. A psychic wave gun.”

Sayaka darted up and looked intently at it. “A weapon that can destroy monsters?”

“That was the intent. It has been in the works since I learned about their existence two years ago, our ace in the hole, so to speak. It amplifies the user’s *nen* and directs it against the enemy.”

Taking note of Sayaka’s disappointed expression, Mephisto smiled and added, “This alone should give you similar capabilities to those of the paranormal commando corps being developed in the outside world, except that this has dual chakra filters, one to absorb spiritual energy and one to project it. You are familiar with the concept of chakra?”

“Yes,” Sayaka nodded. She’d gotten an explanation of the word during lectures about yoga from Master Rai on Earth.

The chakra were dispersed among seven locations on the human body—the

crown of the head, brow of the forehead or third eye, the throat, heart, solar plexus, sacrum and the loins or root—portals for absorbing certain kinds of energy. The lower two handled physical energy; the middle three, emotional energy; the chakra in the forehead took in spiritual energy while the chakra in the crown of the head released it.

However, activating the latter two was difficult to impossible for any but the most virtuous of spiritual practitioners. The crown chakra had been from ancient times a symbol of a holy man. Statues of the Buddha represented this chakra with the protruding crown of his head. It was said that holy men could bring about great miracles through the release of the energy from that chakra.

She didn't understand it, but apparently Mephisto's gun could capture the energy from those two chakras. Purifying the *nen* passing through it, and transforming it into a powerful burst of spiritual energy, it could strike down a demon. Like Kyoya's *nenpo*.

Mephisto was about to say something when a low growl permeated the room, along with a strobing blue light. The monitors automatically switched to an exterior view—and stopped transmitting. The warnings and flashing lights also stopped. For a moment, darkness ruled. And then retreated.

The door and the walls around it radiated with a wan luster and turned half-transparent, letting in the light from the corridor. The black-hooded Suiki stood in the center of the light like a specter. The miasma of devilish loathing erupted from his entire body and struck at Sayaka, rooting her to the spot.

"I've been looking for you and the boy. I came to return the favor for this one eye of mine."

"No, this man is—" Sayaka stood in front of Mephisto, as if to block the path.

"No? Doesn't much matter to me. This world will fall into our clutches hereafter. But first I will sacrifice you to our god. You should thank me for the honor." Suiki cackled. "Alas, there will be no hereafter for you."

Accordingly, the broad array of equipment and even the hard floor itself—excepting the spot they were standing on—warped and wavered and dissolved. The computers sank into the floor, the desks fused with the machines. The swimming shadows of Demon Realm fishes were visible through the walls. The

phantasms slowly closed on Sayaka, cruelly seeking to stab terror deep into the marrow of their mortal enemy.

“I am impressed,” Mephisto mused as he prepared the psychic wave gun. “This is turning out to be a very valuable experience.”

“You do know that every attack so far has proved pointless,” Suiki said contemptuously.

“It’s only an experimental model,” said Mephisto. “But how does it feel?”

A blue-white flash of light lit up Suiki’s form in a blinding glare. With a horrid, hoarse shriek, the demon fell writhing to the floor.

The light faltered and went out.

“Oh, damn,” Mephisto said breezily. “Needs a bit more work.” He handed the weapon to Sayaka.

“But—”

At that moment, Sayaka felt a sharp pain running through her heart, like a razor-sharp blade tearing her asunder. Red stains blossomed on her white blouse.

“Not once, but twice. Such impertinence!” Suiki arose, muttering like a madman.

The psychic wave gun hadn’t quite done the job. He raised the tentacles on his right side. There in their restraining grasp was Sayaka’s shadow. From around its chest dripped drops of blood. As he had fallen, Suiki had punctured the shadow with the tips of his tentacles.

“Wound the body and wound the shadow. Kill the shadow and kill the body. Have you seen it? The demonic power to send a shadow back to where it came from? Boy, now you can watch me rip off her head and tear off her arms!”

The tentacles twinkled and dug into Sayaka’s left shoulder. Sayaka clamped her hand to the same place and screamed.

“Think of the important people in your life,” Mephisto said, keeping Sayaka from falling down. “The less tainted and more resolute the spiritual energy passing through the chakra filter, the greater amount of purified energy it will

produce. Unfortunately, an eccentric and perverse chap such as myself is not of much use in this instance. But you can do it. Think—the one person you would die of sorrow if you lost, the one person you love the most.”

Sayaka refused to surrender to the pain as she leveled the gun. The tentacles moved again. Blood showered from her right wrist. The gun fell to the floor.

“Die.” Suiki raised the tentacles and was about to punch through the shadow’s throat. The earth suddenly shook. Suiki staggered.

“Now.”

Mephisto quickly retrieved the gun. Sayaka grasped it. The face of her father on his sickbed rose up in her thoughts. And—

Suiki surely never counted on what was coming next. A crimson current poured from the muzzle of the psychic wave gun and became a raging tide sweeping around the demon’s body, according to the perverse laws of that other world burning every last cell to a crisp.

With one final bellow, Suiki disappeared. The shaking of the earth stilled.

Mephisto waved his hand again. The emergency lights in the ceiling came on. Utterly exhausted, Sayaka fell into his arms, the unlikely victor in the struggle to the death.

Mephisto carefully placed his free hand on a nearby piece of equipment. It had returned to its previously solid state. Together with Suiki’s death, the demon’s magical powers had abated. However, the melted and fused walls and machinery stayed that way, turning the room into a life-sized installation of abstract art.

He sat Sayaka down on a couch whose legs had sunk into the floor. “That was quite a performance,” he said in an unusually gentle voice.

“That earthquake—” said Sayaka, recalling the violent upheavals from before. She was shaking with fear. “It toppled even a demon who didn’t conform to the rules of the natural world. That wasn’t—perhaps—a second Devil Quake? Those things appearing from the bowels of the earth—”

Mephisto sensed the time from the biological chronograph embedded in his shoulder. “No, it is three minutes to three o’clock.”

The two stared into empty space, as if lost in prayer. The face of the young soldier rose into their thoughts, somewhere in Demon City Shinjuku engaged in an eternal struggle to the death with the sworn enemy of hell, bearing the fate of the world on his shoulders.

That fate would be determined in the next three minutes.

“You cannot begin to imagine how much power I have right now at my fingertips,” said the Sorcerer.

They were standing ten feet apart. His voice came from no vocal organs. The soul spoke through the cyborg’s mouth.

“The human spirit has always contained amazing reservoirs of energy. Unfortunately, these biological shells are more a hindrance than a help, capable of expressing a mere one percent of its true potential. The proof is all around us, of souls separating from the body at the moment of death and destroying their enemies, of souls transmigrating to others and reincarnating.”

He wasn’t making it up. A team of parapsychology researchers at the University of Virginia had studied thousands of cases of reincarnation in places around the world over the past quarter-century, reporting many incidents of soul transmigration. As the Sorcerer had stated, proof of the inexplicable powers of the soul.

The unflaggingly confident voice continued. “Transforming my *nen* into its spirit essence has bestowed upon me powers that are orders of magnitude greater than when you defeated me before. Furthermore, being housed in this cyborg gives that soul access to all the energy from its fusion generator. That *nen* now fuels this new body. Resign yourself to your inevitable death. Or ally with me.”

“Give me a break, you mutant nut job. You should have died a long time ago.”

Kyoya’s cheerful rejoinder was yet lacking in strength, while the Sorcerer’s booming voice echoed around the concourse. “Dedicating yourself to the Demon Realm, watching everyone else being consumed with despair and fear and loathing is such a pleasant thrill. Before I left the Himalayas, I asked your father to join me. But he was obsessed with the cosmic mind and such, goals impossible to achieve in a lifetime, and refused point-blank.”

“The obsessed one is you! He abandoned his training after you left in order to defeat you. I’m here to settle the score once and for all.”

“Idiot. Listen, boy. Humans are by nature creatures well-suited for the Demon Realm. Remember what I told you the first time we met. The being making its appearance this night had shown its face in this world once before.”

“Shut the hell up!” Kyoya shouted, leaping forward at the same time, raising Asura high above his head. Pouring all of his psychic energy into it, he brought it down on the Sorcerer’s head.

The Sorcerer calmly took the blow with his bare head. The shock radiated through Asura and struck Kyoya’s entire body. He flew backwards through the air, barely managed to orient himself and land on his feet.

A burning sensation screamed through his side.

But that wasn’t what brought him to his knees. The *nen* concentrated in the blow was absorbed lock, stock and barrel at the point of contact into the Sorcerer’s soul. With every attack, he would grow weaker and his opponent would become all the stronger.

“It is too bad. Possession of power and ability exceeding your father’s only guarantees that you will die all the faster. Shall I say a prayer for the dead? Perhaps the argument will sound more compelling after you have died.”

The Sorcerer swung his sword, advancing as he delivered the creepy monologue. Shedding his pride and decorum, Kyoya rolled across the floor, scooted out of the way and somersaulted backwards while dodging each swing. His stores of mental and physical energy were drained dry. His movements had lost all of their elegance.

His feet slipped from under him. He fell. The Devil Sword flashed down before his eyes.

“Victory is mine, boy. Become a ghost and watch the world end. Then I shall send you on to the Demon Realm.”

The Sorcerer drew back the sword with all his might. The next moment he would surely thrust it through Kyoya’s heart. Death loomed over him. Kyoya bit his lip in helpless frustration.

The ground trembled violently.

A fierce wind roared out of the circle of candles. Both the Sorcerer and Kyoya turned around reflexively. Fissures ran through the concrete. This was the earthquake that had saved Sayaka and Mephisto from Suiki's attack.

"Damn!" cried the Sorcerer. "It has already arrived!"

Before the words had finished leaving his mouth, with a resounding crash thick chunks of concrete erupted into the air and a huge arm jutted out of the ground.

The thing from the depths of the earth?

Watching the sight unfolding before his eyes, Kyoya forgot even to get back on his feet.

The arm raised a fist. And slowly unclenched it. In the massive palm was a rusty iron box.

Kyoya understood at once. The *thing* from beneath the earth wasn't the owner of the arm. It was the contents of the box! And it was his job to prevent whatever was inside from getting out.

The Sorcerer whirled around. Kyoya rolled around the tip of the Devil Sword and darted toward the arm. The wrist alone was easily six feet in circumference, the palm as wide as a ten-by-ten foot room.

He struck at the wrist with a shout, but it didn't budge an inch. His *nen*, and his father's *nen*, were both exhausted.

Behind him, the Sorcerer laughed. "Such futility. President Rama will die in exactly thirty seconds. And then, no matter what, the box will open. The only thing you can do is kill me."

The Devil Sword slashed at his feet. Kyoya jumped onto the palm. It looked like living skin but was hard as steel. What was this earth spirit tasked with guarding the box?

"Twenty-five seconds."

The Sorcerer sprang into the air, landing between Kyoya and the box, blocking his way. The Devil Sword whirled and hummed. Kyoya countered

with Asura and parried with all his might, but was pushed backwards. Light warred with darkness as the blades clashed. The darkness swallowed up the light.

“Five seconds.”

Kyoya swept Asura sideways. The Sorcerer sneered and caught it with his left hand and flung them both away.

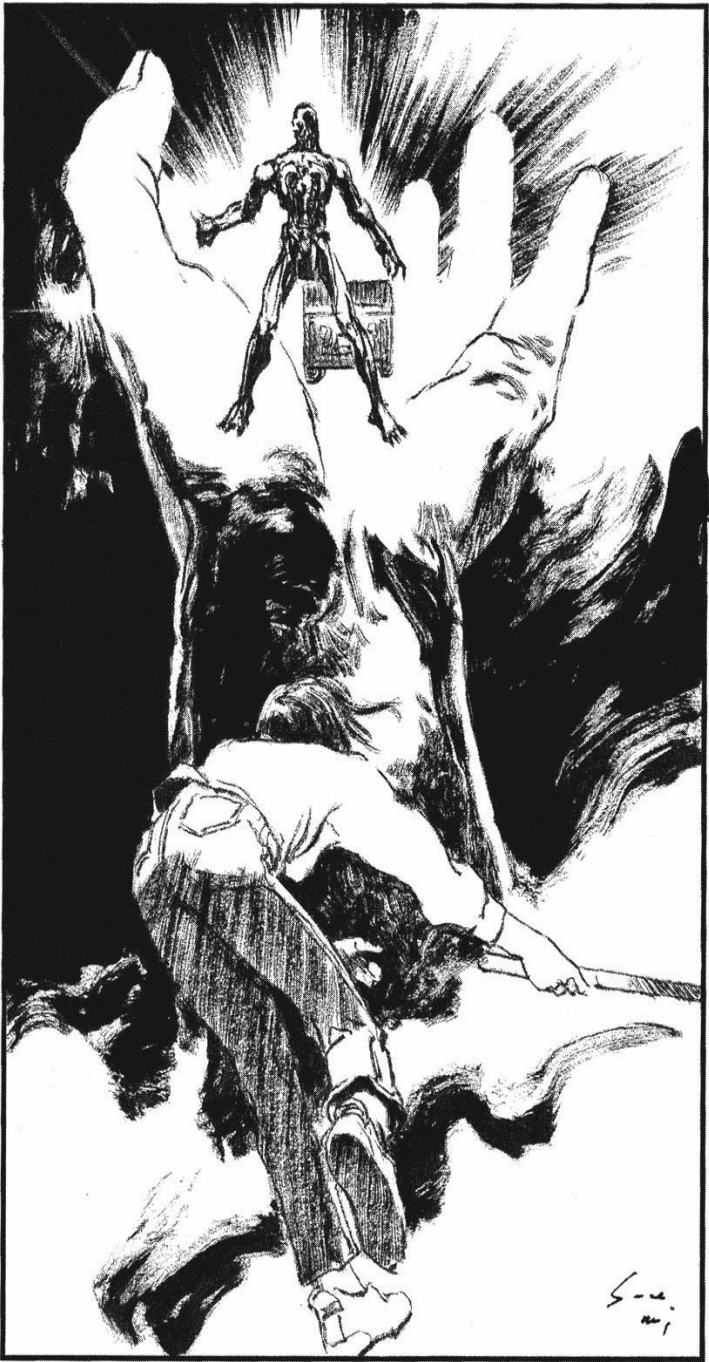
There was no denying his overwhelming strength, and Kyoya couldn't spare any more time sparring. He tumbled down to the floor. Steeling his nerves against the pain, he focused his gaze upwards, at the Sorcerer and the box behind him. A black seam appeared beneath the lid of the box. Inside something roiled and writhed.

“Three seconds. You will die along with this world. Two seconds—”

The Sorcerer raised the Devil Sword high above his head and pounced down on him from above.

“One second!”

Kyoya had already resigned himself to a certain death. His ego—his sense of self—was something apart from him now. The Devil Sword would intersect with his skull in another tenth of a second.



The change that occurred next was wrought in hundredths—thousandths—of a second.

Energy suffused his being. His exhausted *nen*, down to every cell in his body, unleashed a thunderous battle cry that announced his resumption of the contest. Kyoya knew the wellspring of his power—the great cosmic truth that from the beginning had warred with the darkness born at the same time. Though wounded and weakened, this was the purified power of goodness, of virtue, that always championed in the end over evil.

For an instant, Asura was enveloped by a white beam of light. In his state of no-mind, it slashed through the Devil Sword in a single one-handed stroke!

The Sorcerer's soul and steel spine was neatly severed in two above the waist. Scattering blinding light, he toppled over, his soul evaporating without a trace.

The crashing sound reverberating around him, Kyoya sprang to his feet and looked at the box. The lid was closing. Just in time.

He didn't know, but at the same moment in a hospital room in New York, attached to the World Federation building, one second before the appointed time, Master Rai unexpectedly died.

The high council members staring at the monitors didn't grasp this at first. Rushing into the room after the deadline passed, they observed the president resting peacefully, the mark of the hand gone from his throat, and shouted with joy. No one looked at the small man sitting there in the lotus position.

Neither had they realized that in the final moment before that fateful deadline, he had channeled the boundless power of the cosmos into the body of a young warrior several thousand miles away. But his knowledge of the results was evident in the small satisfied smile on his worn and haggard face.

Epilogue

The three of them stood on the broad bridge adjacent to Yotsuya station, at the boundary between Demon City and the outside world. The borderline itself was a fissure in the earth over sixty feet wide and a thousand feet deep.

Kyoya had the wound in his side again treated at Mephisto's hospital and then got a ride back in a linear motorcar.

"See you around," said Kyoya, extending his hand.

Mephisto didn't move. "No need to make affectations you never would have otherwise."

"Yeah, there is that." Kyoya grinned and stepped back. "I don't care to see you or this city again either."

A wry smile creased Mephisto's features. "As long as this city exists, as long as people continue to live here, *that* will surely appear again."

Kyoya couldn't help starting a bit. *He knew about the thing?*

The giant arm had disappeared back into the earth, the lid of the box still sealed, the hand still clenched around it. But Kyoya had grasped something of its true nature—behind the Sorcerer, the repulsive aura wafting from the slightly open gap. *Fear* and *despair* and *malice* and *hate*—every evil emotion hiding in the depths of the human heart.

The Sorcerer had said as much, that human beings had once opened it before—Pandora's Box.

An ancient legend whose origins were lost in the mists of time. The gods, enraged by human pride, created a foolish girl named Pandora, and tricked her into opening a box filled with evil. Ever since that time, human beings have envied and lusted after each other, and taught themselves to curse and to kill.

We have led an accursed existence from long, long ago, Kyoya thought, gazing at the streets slumbering beneath the morning sun. *Little different than the citizens of Demon City. Or rather, entirely suited to them.*

The other pair of clear eyes looking intently at his shadowed profile belonged to Sayaka. Her shadow—restored upon the Sorcerer’s destruction—fell distinctly at her feet.

Kyoya thought of the people of Demon City that he and the girl had chanced upon—the espers who had died defending them; the taxi driver who’d taken them to the DMZ; the ghost rider grateful to be sent to his eternal rest by Sayaka’s tears; and Doctor Mephisto — the mystery man healing the helpless and the wounded with his cold smile and ironic attitude and undivided attention.

The power of good that toppled the Sorcerer dwelt inside all of them. Even the worst among them were capable of doing the right thing. As long as one good man remained, the world was worth preserving. The next time somebody arrived on the scene to destroy it, he’d be back.

“Well, we’re off. I’m sure you have patients waiting.”

Mephisto turned around.

“Wait.” Kyoya again held out his hand.

For whatever reason, Mephisto shook it firmly and then disappeared into the car without even the flicker of an eyebrow.

They watched the car until it had become another dot on Shinjuku Avenue. Then crossed the bridge. Ahead of them awaited the resumption of the same old high school lives they had left three days before.

Kyoya said in a teasing voice, but looking ahead with a straight face, “Mephisto told me—you took out Suiki all by yourself. You’re one scary woman.”

“Well—no—it was nothing like that.” Sayaka blushed.

“Nothing you have to apologize about.”

Kyoya grinned, but he couldn’t see into her heart. What rose into her thoughts at that moment—the face of the man she loved—was not her father alone. But

Kyoya as well.

Now it was his eyes that sparkled, a knowing smile coming to his lips.

“And what pleasant thing are *you* thinking about?” Sayaka asked coyly.

“Oh no, nothing at all,” he protested—though probably a bit too much.

He recalled the end of the famous fable, and the last thing to emerge from Pandora’s Box.

It was called *hope*.

DEMON PALACE
BABYLON

Demon Palace Babylon

Prologue

Nothing terribly unusual happened in the world that night.

In Paris, a terrorist planting a bomb at the base of the Eiffel Tower was arrested. In Saudi Arabia's Nefud Desert, units of the Tezie Lancer Corps, attached to the Ethiopian Army, briefly skirmished with the Jordanian Holy Land Armored Division.

During work to restore the Van Allen radiation belts, a NASA repair ship collided with an abandoned satellite from a certain other country, and Russia dispatched a Soyuz "Thunderbird" rescue craft.

Otherwise, for the most part, the planet was at peace.

It was the year 2030, the thirteenth day of the month, 2:55 in the morning. The city was Tokyo.

In the skies above Shinjuku's Chuo Park a helicopter was on its regularly scheduled patrol. Despite the faint starlight, the landscape below came alive in the night vision scopes. Spotting a strange human-looking shadow, the helicopter moved in.

The gas turbine engine was equipped with noise suppressors. Even when the target had keen hearing or heightened senses, it could close within tens of feet before being detected. That feeling of being watched or the disturbance in the air would likely betray its presence first.

And yet the helicopter had come within a dozen yards when, without a backwards glance, it—he—proceeded slowly toward the Kosu Highway on Twelfth Street in the old capital city center, between the fifteen-foot outer wall and the ruins of the Park Hyatt Hotel.

He must've been drunk or high or have a few screws loose, except that he walked with a steady gait, which made the pilot and police inspector riding

shotgun feel all the more uneasy. But what caught their eye—the scene as bright and distinct as daylight—was that the man was wearing what looked like a long gown.

They couldn't make out the face.

This late at night, and where even robbers and extortionists and other assorted bad guys feared to tread, a solitary figure must be up to no good.

“What do you want to do?” the pilot asked the police inspector.

The man was exhibiting sufficiently suspicious behavior to justify a bit of “hovering” questioning, and a paralyzer gun would do the trick nicely. But a lone drunk was hardly cause for great alarm. Sending around a paddy wagon would take too much time. And anyway, after six o'clock in the evening, in or about the DMZ, the decision was left up to the cop on the scene. The rules of engagement for public servants were clear on that score.

In other words, arrest him, take him into protective custody or leave him be—it was up to them. The inspector had started off thinking protective custody, then considered doing nothing, then favored arrest.

He didn't have any reason, except that the man didn't strike him as a pedestrian or common drunk. The inspector tapped the pilot on the shoulder. “Let's at least pick him up for questioning.”

“Roger that.”

He dropped the helicopter down vertically as he answered, stopping fifteen feet above the man's head. The swish of the rotors tousled his hair and tossed the hem of his gown. Now he looked up. The angle provided a clear look at the bushy black beard covering the man's mouth. He was thin to the point of being gaunt.

The inspector and the pilot were both struck by a grave and momentous vibe. They exchanged curious glances.

The inspector thumbed his mic. “You there. Don't move. Put your hands behind your head and lace your fingers together.”

Normally he would have used much less polite language than that, but

something about the gown-wearing man demanded a measure of decorum.

“This is Shinjuku Police Patrol Helicopter SH 909. We’d like to ask you a few questions, purely on a volitional basis. You’re free to leave at any time. Answer in your normal voice. The audio sensors will pick it up.”

“Understood.”

A low and dignified voice radiated from the speakers, that made the inspector wonder for a moment if this was a job better left to the chief inspector. But he mustered his courage.

“What’s your name and address?”

“I have no good name to call myself. My address is here.”

“C’mon, no playing games,” the inspector said, with more anger than the situation required. That recoiling sense of unease had left him since seeing the man’s face, and he seized at the opportunity to overcompensate. “You want to settle this with a tranquilizer dart? Name and address. Identify yourself.”

“In that case, I shall think of a name henceforth.” As calmly as ever. “My address is here.”

The man reached into the collar of his robe and took out what looked like a cheap memo pad, the kind of thing sold at any stationery store. The men in the helicopter felt a slight sense of relief.

The voice that followed was full of confidence and light with laughter. “Shinjuku Ward, West Shinjuku Nichome, Chuo Park.”

“What?”

“Do you have any other questions?”

The police inspector mulled it over in silence. Then demanded, “What in the world are you doing at this time of night?”

The man gazed curiously at the white wall. It was covered with talismans and sacred symbols of all sorts. They were there to keep the magic *inside* from getting *out*.

“This is *my* house. It will soon be complete. I’ve been strolling around

inspecting it.”

“What are you talking about? Chuo Park is the property of the ward. Besides, the DMZ is the no-go area for a reason.”

The man didn’t answer. Then he smiled. A hair-raising aura filled the cockpit of the helicopter. As if trying to expel it, the inspector pressed, “To start with, where is this house of yours? And how do you intend to finish it soon?”

He didn’t think the man was crazy and so took what he said at face value. Again, there was something about him that demanded it.

“But of course. Construction hasn’t yet begun. In two more minutes.”

The two men in the helicopter finally grasped the man’s nature. Madmen wandering about the DMZ late at night—this was why they had to make sure. They aimed a different night scope inside Chuo Park. The dense canopy of trees moved. There was no wind.

Shadows roamed the winding paths. There should be nothing living there. Attempting to surmount the wall, the cloudy forms sprang up from among the trees and were flung back—evil spirits repelled by the talismans.

Apparently detecting the invisible electromagnetic waves employed by the night vision scope, an eerily familiar voice barked from the speakers. “This is the Shinjuku Police Headquarters. SH 909, proceed into the park.”

The two ignored it. The first ploy the ghosts of Chuo Park used to lure fresh victims into their lair was to mimic an authority figure known to the listener.

Those who heeded such commands and stupidly entered the grounds of the park found there—nothing like any houses or dwellings. The only “buildings” were the ruins of the library and a Tokyo Electric underground substation, also in ruins.

The pilot flipped up the protective cap on the joystick, revealing the trigger buttons for a 30mm Vulcan cannon and a tranquilizer gun powerful enough to sedate an elephant. The heads-up display projected the aiming and firing data inside the helmet visor.

A square floated in the middle of the display. When the square aligned with

the center diagonal, the weapons system locked the guns on the target. The firing computer was linked to the night vision scope. The aim followed the pilot's vision, making it impossible for the target to escape.

"Ten seconds," the man's voice said, reminding them of the number. The time until this so-called construction began. But what? Not a single pillar or column stood in the park. And anyway, the ward certainly hadn't issued any building permits.

"Eight seconds, seven, six—it might be dangerous for you there. You should come down."

The helicopter didn't move. "Here goes." The pilot's finger pressed against the button.

"Hold on," said the police inspector. "At this point, we might as well make sure of what we're shooting at."

The year 2030. The thirteenth of the month, 2:55 in the morning. A bar in Mejiro. It was called "Junko's Jail."

"I'm bored. Let's go someplace more exciting."

A girl in a sailor suit yanked on his hand. The boy in a high school uniform almost fell off the bar stool. He managed to catch his balance and resolutely shook his head.

"No way. Any place more exciting than this is right out for underage kids. Here is hip enough already."

"Hip?" the girl pouted. Across the counter, the bartender flashed a wry smile. "Even this guy is some teaching assistant sent over by the Education Association. The beer and whisky is all non-alcoholic. The hostesses are nuns working part time, so no touchy, no feely. Who in the world would bother coming to this place?"

"You got it all wrong, sister," said the fat lady bartender, polishing a glass and glancing around the place.

The bar's owner, Junko Toya. She was amazingly fat. She'd started off wanting to be a hostess, but none of the customers would get within an arm's

length of her. So she was stuck there behind the counter, looking rather like a hippo in a mud hole.

“Green Mountain Blues” drifted though the dim, twenty-by-fifty foot interior. The hostesses in their precisely buttoned-up blouses and the uniformed high school students sat there ramrod-straight, discussing an upcoming exam. Seven or eight altogether.

“Plenty of seminary students come here. And just between you and me, one way or another they’re all as horny as alley cats.”

“Let’s go, Izayoi-kun.” The girl again pulled on the boy’s arm.

“Hey, if you want to go, then go. I’m getting to like this place,” he grumbled, a glass of non-alcoholic beer in one hand. For a high school student, he wasn’t overly tall or short, his shoulders not too broad. And yet he was a solidly built and rather handsome young man.

At first glance, he might seem the kind of honors student never found without an English dictionary in one hand, but draw closer and he had about him an approachable, laid-back air.

Told that, just a short time ago, this young man had engaged in a fight to the death in *that* place, with the fate of mankind in the balance, and managed to eke out a win, the average onlooker would gape at first—then upon further consideration—nod in agreement.

His name was Kyoya Izayoi, a senior at Minakaze High School in Tokyo. “Sorry, but I work as a bouncer here. I can’t be going anywhere for five more minutes.” Then for some reason, he glanced at the clock on the wall. A shadow passed across his face.

“What?” asked Toya.

“Oh, nothing.” Kyoya shook his head. Rubbing the back of his neck with his hand, he added, “This time of the night gives me the creeps. Three in the morning.”

“Huh,” Junko Toya nodded.

Three o’clock in the morning.

The time of night when humans and demons crossed paths. The time when everybody slept, when the human heart was the weakest and most likely to part with that which made it human.

That time would soon be arriving.

“You’re mean,” the girl complained. “You finally said we could go on a date, so I came all the way here. You didn’t say anything about getting together on the job. I thought Izayoi-kun had more class than that. I’m going to—

The rest of the sentence died in her mouth. Her eyes grew wide. She looked at the side of Kyoya’s face.

This time, like a receding tide, all sounds ceased. The music too. The eyes of the hostesses and the guests focused on Kyoya.

The girl watched dumbfounded as he silently slid off the bar stool. Something sprouted from his fists. A pair of disposable chopsticks. Standing in front of the bar, Kyoya slowly rotated his body like a radar dish, scanning the room. And quickly oriented himself in the direction of the door.

His hands rose above his head, the tips of the chopsticks jutting out. There was something in front of him. He had seen something.

It was three o’clock.

“Three seconds,” said the man in the gown. He stood in front of the wall around Chuo Park.

With a mechanical whine, the turret in the bottom of the helicopter rotated to focus the tranquilizer gun on his silhouette.

“Two seconds.”

A black dot welled up on Kyoya’s face. It grew into a line and slid down his cheek.

Blood.

His whole body was soon covered by it.

“One second.”

In a spacious director’s office in a hospital not far away, a man in black raised

his head. His was perhaps the most beautiful countenance in the world.

He had just dipped a quill pen into a bottle of ink. The wet tip of the pen evinced the only sign of an abnormality. With his clear, dark eyes, he examined the contents of the glittering container. Once the color of the deep blue sea, it had turned red, the color of blood.

“Construction begins.”

A thunderous roar rolled across Shinjuku.

At a “youth bar” in Mejiro, Kyoya Izayoi slashed with his hands straight down.

The ink bottle erupted with pale flames that singed the director’s hand.

On a small bed, a long-haired girl sat straight up.

A ferocious blow hit the side of the helicopter, spinning it like a top. The altitude controls were rendered useless. The stick went dead. The rotor struck the ground and bent like a pretzel. The craft careened across Twelfth Street, smashed into the Park Hyatt Hotel and burst into flames.

Whatever had destroyed the helicopter roared like an out-of-season cyclone, blowing through every street and nook and cranny of Shinjuku. It shattered windows in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex, scattered buckets sitting on a corner in Kabuki-cho, and tore to pieces an ominous mist that had just sprung up in the Kawadacho neighborhood in Yotsuya.

Here and there on the streets and on the sides of buildings appeared the bloodstains of the homeless and the graveyard shift cops picked up and bodily thrown by the gale. The sudden shock wave touched every part of Shinjuku before disappearing.

The rest of the city facing Shinjuku across the quarter-mile fissure in the earth didn’t feel the whisper of a breeze. What was born in Shinjuku obeyed all of its laws. Even new and unknown forms of destruction.

“Izayoi-kun!”

The girl and all the hostesses ran over to him. Kyoya slumped to the floor on his knees. His face was covered with blood, its skeletal outlines displayed like those of a completely different person.

After the women bore him to the back room and laid him down on a bed, one chopstick was left behind, broken in two. Nobody there was aware that the tip was pointing in the direction Kyoya had been facing in Demon City Shinjuku—Chuo Park.

The next morning, as the first light of dawn cast the cityscape into shadowed relief, the people of Shinjuku saw that the destruction stealing through the streets and alleys the night before had given birth to something completely new—in Shinjuku's Chuo Park, in the so-called DMZ, in the most dangerous place on earth, home to the mad and the magical.

Floating *above* it was a structure whose existence could not be believed. It wasn't exactly floating, but rested on four spindly legs that rose up from the borders of the park, as if intending to straddle its entire hundred and six thousand square yards.

It looked like an upside-down morning glory, with a wide, double-flight of stairs winding lazily up and around the bell of the "flower," forming a circular ziggurat.

It rose three hundred feet into the air. Holding up the several hundred thousand tons of weight while maintaining a precarious balance must be due to the geometry of the funnel-shaped tower. The flat, terraced area at the bottom would be the living area.

Even the residents of Demon City, accustomed to unexplained phenomena, were amazed at the appearance of this strange giant edifice, that hadn't existed the day before.

If they knew how it had truly come to be, they would shiver with fear.

The dead helicopter crew knew. This immense building in the air had appeared out of empty space in but a split second.

Part One: The Blue Knight

I

Another magnetic linear-drive cargo ship arrived. A fifty-thousand-ton freighter. An elliptical hole opened at the bottom of the tower. A gangplank—that looked from a distance like it was made out of shiny aluminum foil—connected to the ship’s hold.

With a mind-mesmerizing guidance system leading them, the cargo was taken inside the tower. Watching the procession, the short-sleeved old man behind the counter sighed.

“That ship’s from Africa. Elephants, giraffes, rhinoceroses, zebras, lions, water buffaloes—it’s Noah’s freaking ark.”

“Wasn’t that other ship from Paris’s Fine Arts Foundation? Those crates must be filled with masterpieces. What kind of a house is that?” The man’s wife mused, gazing with enchanted eyes at one of their two customers. “Who in the world could be living there?”

That customer had sat down at the back of the small ramen shop and ordered a roasted pork ramen. Had ordered, but she couldn’t say now whether or not he’d eaten it. She was sure she’d watched him sucking up the yellow noodles, but when faced with the incongruity of this particular customer and an ordinary Chinese rice bowl, she couldn’t say for sure.

It was as if a brilliant artist had imbued his final portrait with the talent and experience accumulated over a lifetime—the smooth curve drawn by the eyebrows and the bridge of the nose—black eyes like a crystal clear winter’s night—lips that would kindle in women and men alike the desire to taste them.

Even his shadow falling on the ground beside him was more beautiful than any real woman. Except that this beauty was not the work of God, but something the devil made. The haunting light glittering at the back of his eyes

said as much. The cruel smile reflected now and then on the screen of a monitor said as much.

Knowing this man's occupation, who wouldn't have gaped in disbelief and immediately think of a madman doing unspeakable things to the dead?

"A refill, Doctor Mephisto?" the wife asked in a throaty voice.

"I'm good," he answered curtly.

But those cool words alone were enough to make almost any woman in the universe swoon.

"What do you think, Doctor?" The ramen shop proprietor asked, oblivious to his wife's emotional state. "What's with that building? Three days ago it appears in Chuo Park twenty yards above the ground. And then taking shipments of whatever nonstop, day and night. No matter how big a house, isn't it all a bit too much? There must be another thirty of those fifty-thousand-ton cargo ships waiting to dock."

Even if he had noticed, he was unlikely to say anything to this particular man. For this was Shinjuku's very own Doctor Mephisto. Also known as the Demon Physician. When his slender hand wielded a scalpel, the most malignant disease in the world didn't stand a chance.

"This may sound funny to you," the proprietor continued. "But it makes sense to me. See, the ward sold the land and air rights for the legs holding that thing up. The guy in charge at the time is dead, but the contract's there on the computer. So that's that. The way I look at it, they hauled it here in a single night. There's no way they built something like that there, even if designing stuff like that on a computer is a piece of cake. Guaranteed that thing's gonna cause one helluva shit-storm sooner than later."

Mephisto didn't express any objections to the proprietor's opinions.

Three days before, the large structure had suddenly appeared in the air above Chuo Park. Ward officials insisted on an on-site inspection and made contact via wireless.

Needless to say, three minutes after its appearance was reported, the park was surrounded by antiaircraft weapon systems, starting with armored police

helicopters and large caliber laser cannons.

Strangely enough, in short order a response was received over normal frequencies and the tense situation was defused.

According to the ward government, the presumed owner of the building quickly responded to demands to identify himself and provide an explanation for the appearance. He was a resident of the ward who had constructed his home following all of the lawful procedures. The contract could be found on file in the ward's computers. According to the contract, because a name was not required at the time, it would not be provided now.

The amazed ward officials examined the computers and confirmed that the absolute and unfettered rights to the land on which the four columns sat and the air twenty yards up—the space from the ground to the bottom of the structure enclosed by the four legs—had been, in the government's name, sold.

The paperwork was all in order. Nobody in the ward government had been given any reason to think otherwise. Even the money stipulated in the contract had been transferred to the ward accounts on the stated day.

Of course, the next question was who had signed off on the deal. Based on the name and date on the contract, the person in charge was sought out, but he had died in the meantime.

This alone did not settle the matter and the investigation continued even now. As it turned out, the contract had been drawn up in the first decade of the twenty-first century, specifically on the thirteenth of September, the same day as the abominable Devil Quake. Nobody would have imagined that a contract would have been formally concluded on that fateful day.

Every metaphorical *i* was dotted and *t* crossed. The intent of the document was in force.

And so the siege around the structure was lifted, and the rest of the day was spent rooting through the legal nooks and crannies in the Building Standards Act.

As a result, the effects on the surrounding environment—the amount of sunlight, the psychological impact, the “sense of oppression” — were judged to

not be a problem. In terms of the sunlight, it was confirmed that the contours of the building changed according to the rotation of the earth, ensuring that the shadows did not fall on any “reserved” areas.

The existence of the building and the owner’s residency in the ward was formally recognized.

Within an hour of this notification, the cargo ships started arriving. The number of ships filling the blue sky from all around and their contents dumbfounded the spectators.

The onslaught of shipping continued without a break, now in its second day. The proprietor’s misgivings were understandable.

“How much?” asked a low, hoarse voice.

The proprietor and his wife cast surprised looks at the table opposite Mephisto. Directly beneath the monitor was their other customer. A thin figure wearing a gown that cast off a dull glow, as if made from metal. He got to his feet. He’d arrived a bit before Mephisto and ordered a chow mein soba.

He’d ignored the monitor and slurped down the soba and they’d all but forgotten he was there. But on closer examination, he had about him a grave and refined aura that suffered little in comparison with Mephisto.

The proprietor gathered his wits about him and said, “Um, that’ll be seven hundred yen.”

“I’ll leave it here.”

He lined up the silver coins on the table top with his gnarly fingers and walked to the door.

“Come again.”

By the time his voice and the sound of the door closing died away, it was interrupted by Mephisto’s. “Thank you for the meal.” He tipped back the ramen bowl and silently drank down the remaining broth and got to his feet. “What do I owe you?”

“No, no, no,” said the wife, beaming at him. “Taking money from Doctor Mephisto is bad luck around these parts.”

“But I couldn’t—”

“Oh, such things go without saying, Doctor.”

“Well, then.”

With an unusual alacrity, he withdrew his hands from his black cape and gave them an elegant bow. A well-worn habit.

He ducked through the door with quick steps, paused and looked right and left. He was standing on the corner at the end of a narrow alleyway. There was nobody else in sight. The bright noonday sun lingered lazily on the concrete and asphalt.

A four-way stop on his right. Mephisto set off, the hems of his cape glittering. Turning left at the crossroads, he spotted the gown-wearing man off in the distance. The asphalt of the sidewalk was stripped away, revealing the black earth beneath.

Mephisto calmly started after him. He hadn’t gone more than thirty feet when the naked framework of a ruined building rose up on the left. The gown-wearing man turned left.

Several seconds behind him, Mephisto came to a halt. A large black shadow engulfed him. A strange figure was standing there less than six feet away. Even in this nightmare-ridden Demon City, such a costume was rare—a knight astride a horse.

Not a mech battle suit, but the outward appearance was reminiscent of medieval armor. The face, the limbs—anywhere the air might touch—were encased in dark blue metal that glinted in the sunlight.

The horse sported the same, standing there silently waiting for its master’s command. It could have leapt out of a medieval engraving. Taken together with the modern buildings around them, the neighborhoods of Shinjuku reaching out behind them, they somehow became a strange and austere work of classic art.

Mephisto focused his attention on the knight’s right hand. The steel fingers held a comet trailing a long tail—a ten-foot lance.

The spear tip wasn’t metal, but was also coated with a dark blue that ran down

to his hand. If this mounted knight sallied forth, no matter what kind of weapon he was carrying, he wouldn't have any difficulty skewering his target.

The man in the gown was nowhere to be seen. "An interesting bodyguard you've got there," Mephisto observed in a low voice. His cool glance met the knight's visor. The eyes beneath were likely electronic. There was no telling what would happen next.

"Well, then," Mephisto said. "If you would excuse me."

He turned around. He'd taken five steps when he heard the neigh of the horse. And a hard sound—of hooves striking the ground.

Mephisto walked on in silence. Ten paces. Twenty. Thirty.

The fierce sound of pounding hooves struck against his black cape. The earth shook. The charge was upon him. Mephisto didn't turn around. He smiled. A smile that said: *You dare to threaten me? I am the Demon Physician.*

Blackness swallowed up the smile. Mephisto sprang into the air. The knight passed below him. Blue light flashed from his right hand. The round spear tip of the lance plunged through Mephisto's torso. The knight whipped his arm and flung the black-clad doctor through the sky.

Not checking the results himself, the knight yanked on the reins. The horse reared back, then planted its hooves on the stony ground and skidded to a sudden stop, sparks flying.

When the knight did turn around, a shudder ran through his frame. Mephisto was standing thirty feet in front of him. "That lance didn't go through me," he calmly explained. "I went through the lance. Either way, you are an overly violent man. You need treatment."

The horse and rider didn't answer, but charged again. The deep blue spear tip sparkled. Air swirled around the shaft. The true nature of the knight and the weapon was on display.

Something slashed through the blue sky. A cloud of dust arose. The horse suddenly stopped. The flurry of small stones bounced off Mephisto's cape. His gaze fell on a section of the road where a patch of asphalt still remained. A slender object sprouted out of the ground.

A disposable wooden chopstick buried halfway through the lump of blacktop.

Mephisto's mouth bent into a knowing smile. His eyes turned toward the ruins, as if, in that moment, he had traced back the trajectory of the chopstick. A stone wall next to the building formed a narrow alleyway, leading to a dead end that was hidden from the view of both Mephisto and the knight.

"You certainly took your time," said Mephisto.

The knight pointed his lance toward the alley. Then retreated as the horse slowly backed away. Something had touched its untamed senses. It ignored the knight's heels in its sides and kept going backwards.

A fierce shower of light tipped the scales once again—energy burst from the tip of the lance. What form would the destruction take? Fire or ice? A shock wave?

The roadway appeared to suck up the light—no, not the roadway, but a wooden sword that swung outward from the shadows. The person holding it stepped into view. The gold buttons quivered on his black collar.

"Excuse me for barging in like this," said the young man.

"Ah," said Doctor Mephisto. "The star performer makes his appearance on the stage. Kyoya Izayoi."

II

The mounted knight's surprise could clearly be felt. He drew back the lance and looked down at the high school student with blank surprise.

"Hoh. Your name must strike a bell with him," Mephisto teased. He asked in what was for him an unusually jocular tone, "What brings you here?"

"I came to see this funny flying house," Kyoya said, taking in Mephisto and the knight with bright eyes. He'd disposed of the frightful burst of energy from the spear tip with a single swipe of his sword, yet made no mention of it. "I was hungry, and thought of getting a ramen. Lo and behold, here you are, causing trouble. I was going to wait to see how it turned out, but couldn't resist. Sorry for sticking my oar in."

"Not at all."

Despite Mephisto's nonchalant reaction, Kyoya looked at the knight. "So what are we gonna do with him?" he said, scratching his head. "Well, I'm here, so Gigantor can sit this one out. How about I take him off your hands?"

"Hmm." Mephisto thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "We will meet again and discuss your therapy then."

"On that note—" Kyoya held up a fist to the knight, a gesture of respect among fighting men of bad character.

Murderous intent once again welled up around the knight. Feigning naivete was Kyoya's opening gambit.

"Kyoya Izayoi." A voice as if from within the earth issued forth from the mouth of the helmet. "In deference to that name, I shall withdraw. The day will come when the decisive battle must yet be fought."

"Whatever. No need to come to blows." Kyoya nodded to the knight.

The horse turned its head toward Mephisto. The hooves stamped against the ground. The dark blue knight rushed past the Demon Physician.

“What the *hell* was that all about?” Kyoya asked, emerging from the alley. “I guess he wanted to become famous. Taking out Doctor Mephisto would sure do the trick.”

“In which case, that would make him a lot easier to deal with,” Mephisto said, patting his chest. “Fully unleashed, the energy and mental power in that spear could destroy half of Shinjuku.”

Kyoya only shrugged.

“And why did you come here again?”

“Like I said. To take a look at the floating house.”

“Here? There are much better sightseeing spots.” Mephisto smiled. In all of Demon City, this man would so reveal his humanity only to Kyoya and one other person.

“Say what?” Kyoya pursed his lips and glared at him, though there wasn’t any force behind it. “Hey, stop it with the funny looks.”

“This is Ichigaya, Kawadacho. Not only are there more suitable venues for house viewing and eating ramen, but more appropriate places where I would expect to find you.”

“W-what is that supposed to mean?” Kyoya flushed. He’d sent the strange apparition threatening Doctor Mephisto packing, and yet the same Doctor Mephisto could so easily knock him off his game. “What are you implying?”

“I haven’t implied a thing. As yet.”

Mephisto’s smile broadened. Kyoya hastily averted his gaze. When it came to hitting beneath the belt, the Demon Physician knew his weak points. “What I was going to say is that a mile or so on is the United Nations Philanthropic Hospital. My business rival, so to speak. There is a nurse in the surgical department by the name of Sayaka Rama.”

Kyoya feigned ignorance and stared up at the sky. “Nice blue sky.”

“I’d only be surprised if it wasn’t,” Mephisto replied crisply. “More interesting

to me is the man who can't man up to the fact that he came to see a woman. I'd be happy to accompany you the rest of the way."

"Mind your own business," Kyoya fumed. "I haven't said one way or the other."

"No need to put emotions into words. I am a doctor. When the blood rushes so violently to the head, my business is to look to the cause. Lead the way."

The white door silently slid open to the side. A blue uniform approached, together with the scent of flowers, suggestive of freesia. Her waist-long hair swayed. She smiled brightly at the two men. "Hello," she said. "Kyoya, Doctor Mephisto, you seem in good spirits."

"It has been a while," Doctor Mephisto said with a slight nod. He gave Kyoya a sidelong glance.

"Well, ah, thanks." Kyoya's smile was as stiff as his voice. "Sorry for barging in like this. You must be busy."

"Not right now. I'm on a break."

Sayaka showed the two to a pair of chairs. They were in the hall of the United Nations Philanthropic Hospital. Its sponsorship meant that the facilities lacked for nothing.

The patients moved in electric wheelchairs or on self-propelled walkways, leisurely coming and going. If they couldn't move on their own, human or robotic nurses were there to assist. The "rehab light" pouring down from the ceiling accelerated muscular rejuvenation and protected against aging and cellular deterioration.

This was one byproduct of the large-scale research groups the United Nations had sent into Demon City. And the investigations were still underway.

Mephisto said with an entirely straight face, "In any case, we should have called ahead first. But Izayoi-kun here said he wanted to see you."

Kyoya jumped as if hit by an electric shock. "W-what are you are going on about? He just made that up."

"Well, either way, here we are. That should be sufficient, no?"

“Sufficient, my—” Kyoya started to say, when he became aware of the sad eyes looking into his.

“You really didn’t want to come here that badly?”

“No, no, no. Nothing like that. Really. This guy’s just messing with me.” Kyoya turned away in a huff. The tendons in his neck stood out.

“How are your patients doing?” Mephisto calmly asked, stepping in to rescue the conversation.

“They’ve increased in the last two or three days. The gale that blew through the city the night that building appeared has affected many people.”

“A nuclear explosion.”

“I think so.”

Mephisto and Sayaka nodded. Kyoya put on a serious face. Three days before, the gale — the shock wave — that accompanied the appearance of that huge structure was theorized to be the result of its constituent atoms and those in the surrounding atmosphere fusing together when it suddenly materialized in the air.

“Teleportation is not something human technology is capable of,” Mephisto said, deeply impressed as he rarely was. “What would that say of the person living there?”

“Opinions are a dime a dozen. For these last three days, the United Nations must have collected several hundred million.”

“And one of them must be correct. However—”

Mephisto stopped speaking and cast his eyes down the hallway to the lobby. Sayaka, then Kyoya—who’d been staring at the ceiling—followed his gaze.

Escorted by four tall men in dark suits, a gray-coated individual approached the receptionist. A face that Kyoya and Sayaka had seen before.

“Hey—” Sayaka went to stand up.

Kyoya grabbed the hem of her skirt and pulled her back down again.

“But that’s Yamashina-san.”

“The look on his face tells me he’s up to no good.” Except the grim look on

his face made Sayaka giggle. “The last time we met with him, we nearly ended up getting ourselves killed. Maybe it’s just a coincidence, but if not, I’m not keen to end up the devil’s plaything again. What do you say we get out of here?”

“Sure.” Sayaka nodded, her eyes bright with trust and affection not in the least bit feigned, a reaction strong enough to leave Kyoya a bit flustered.

His next move was interrupted by a pretty *bing bong* chime from a ceiling loudspeaker. “*Surgical nurse 737, Sayaka Rama, please come to the number one reception area.*”

The announcement being made in an equally pleasant voice didn’t keep Kyoya from scowling. “Son of a bitch!”

As if in payback for that remark, the following announcement said, “Kyoya Izayoi and Doctor Mephisto’s presence is also requested.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Doctor Mephisto was the one who said it this time.

Five minutes later, they were sitting around a table in the number one reception room in the thirtieth basement level. Dai Yamashina, chief of the World Federation Government Information Bureau, Japan section, was the only other person there. The guards waited in another room down the hall.

“It’s been a while, Izayoi-kun,” Yamashina said, a heartfelt smile creasing his warm, friendly face.

“Yeah, it has,” Kyoya replied. Despite his obvious confusion, he smiled too. He wasn’t so rude as to turn aside such a well-meaning greeting. “You’re looking as professional as always. Get a raise recently?”

“Still being paid peanuts,” Yamashina said wryly. “And this is Doctor Mephisto? I believe this is the first time we’ve met.”

He nodded. Mephisto returned the gesture.

“Rama-san informed me about your assistance in that recent incident. The World Federation government would like to see that you are appropriately compensated.”

“I’m afraid you are mistaken,” Mephisto coolly said. “I did nothing of any

note. And therefore expect nothing in return.”

“In any case, the World Federation is deeply grateful. If there is anything we can offer you, do not hesitate to let us know.”

The words had hardly left his mouth before the expression froze on his face—in response to Mephisto’s thin smile, a smile quite different from what he’d shown Kyoya and Sayaka. More like: *And if I asked for your life?*

“Um, what did you want to see us about?” Sayaka asked nervously. “Something to do with my father?”

“No, thankfully. Or not. Something else entirely.” The section chief shook his head. The tense expression on his face only set Kyoya and Sayaka more on edge. “Did you receive a letter today?”

“No. Well, I haven’t checked.”

The section chief held up an envelope in his right hand. “I apologize for taking the liberty of hand-delivering your mail. This morning, starting with the prime minister, three hundred of Japan’s top government and business officials received a letter just like it. Please read it.”

Sayaka took the envelope and cautiously examined it. The “paper” was made of a metallic silver. The address of the hospital and Sayaka’s name was engraved with laser precision. The flap was closed with yellow wax in the medieval style.

“That’s a curious-looking seal,” Kyoya said, leaning forward. “What is it? Lizard? Eagle?”

“A dragon,” said Mephisto.

“Exactly,” nodded Section Chief Yamashina. “We are currently investigating the owner. It’s quite likely that nothing will turn up. But if there was anything to be found, the World Federation’s supercomputers would have coughed up a result in ten seconds flat. All we know is the sender’s address.”

“Hoh.” Mephisto’s eyes glimmered with a strange light. Though there was no draft, the hem of the cape fluttered. Even Kyoya’s eyes widened.

“I’ll read it.”

Sayaka broke the seal and extracted the white card inside and scanned the text

with a combination of suspicion and unease. Kyoya read over her shoulder. The note was brief and to the point.

Sayaka Rama-sama,

You are cordially invited to a housewarming party, to be held at the following address on the twentieth of the month, the year 2030.

I am aware that you lead a busy life, but truly hope you will be able to attend. A courtesy limousine will be provided on the designated day. The most unusual delights await you.

A car will arrive at one o'clock in the afternoon (wherever you may happen to be).

The Lord of Babylon Palace

Shinjuku Ward, West Shinjuku, Chuo Park

“Presumptuous bastard,” said an openly indignant Kyoya. “There’s no way you’re going, Sayaka-chan.”

“But why would *I* receive such a letter?”

“That is a puzzle,” Section Chief Yamashina interrupted. “Which is why I came. Today, the World Federation Government Information Bureau received a list of all the invitees who were sent the same invitation from the same sender. Izayoi-kun, your name was included along with Sayaka-san’s.”

III

All eyes focused on Kyoya.

“You do have some interesting friends,” said Mephisto.

Kyoya fired back, “Starting with you, I suppose. None of *my* friends would show off like that.”

“Then why—” Sayaka furrowed her brows.

“The puzzle should soon unravel,” said Mephisto.

“How’s that?”

“Simple. Accept the invitation.”

“Eh?”

“The invitation itself states that no matter where you are, somebody will be there to pick you up. Rather than fighting them, join them. You can’t beard the lion unless you venture into its den.”

“What would I want with a lion’s beard?”

Mephisto said, “What do you think, Sayaka-san?”

“Hey!” Kyoya protested. “What the hell? That’s not gonna happen, right, Sayaka?”

Sayaka said, “No, I think I will.”

“What?”

“I’ve no idea why I received an invitation, though it probably has something to do with me being the daughter of the president of the World Federation. Besides, sending out a list like that, regardless of the malicious intent, seems to be throwing down a gauntlet. I accept the challenge.”

“Cut it out,” Kyoya insisted, though clearly losing the argument. “C’mon Yamashina-san, do something.”

“To be honest,” the section chief stated, “we were hoping that’s what she would decide to do.” He continued despite Kyoya’s raised eyebrows. “Taking all the worst-case scenarios into account, the cabinet of course will be deploying android standins and agents in disguise. But considering the technological sophistication of the opponent, such steps are not guaranteed to succeed. In order to get as close to the target and gather as much information as possible, we need people who can adapt and react on the spot to any contingency. Examining the guest list, that would be Sayaka-san and you.”

“Easy for you to say,” Kyoya grumbled. “No matter how many subs and standins the prime minister and the cabinet send in as reserves, she’s still gonna shoulder the full load. Whose idea was that? Did her father—Mr. President of the World Federation—sign off on this?”

“Well—”

“See, Sayaka-chan? There’s no freaking way!”

Sayaka gazed back at the fuming Kyoya with an indomitable expression. “I’m going,” she said.

“Sounds settled,” Doctor Mephisto said, with a wry look at Kyoya. “There’s nothing to worry about, Sayaka-chan. You’ll have the world’s best bodyguard with you.”

Four days later, at one o’clock in the afternoon, black limousines began arriving in front of the fence surrounding Chuo Park, curiously in the same place where the patrol helicopter had crashed.

The VIPs who’d received the invitations came to the mysterious floating house. Movers and shakers in government, business and the arts. No one declined to attend. Skipping out would not only look bad, but even worse, would yield the limelight to other celebrities.

Especially with the mass media focusing their attention day and night on the enormous structure. For audiences outside Demon City, the bigger the scale of the supernatural phenomenon, the better the entertainment value.

To the peaceful world, like the Devil Quake itself, the reality show that was Demon City shook the foundations of physical law. Its very existence was a threat. *Real* information was limited to the local and small-scale. Everything else was treated as comedic filler.

Though the perfect attendance came down to one incontrovertible factor: bodyguards were also allowed.

The last guest arrived thirty minutes later.

The glittering panoply of celebrities was surrounded by mobile police commandos and robot troops. Among them were Kyoya and Sayaka.

Along with the camera crews and reporters, Kyoya ignored the guards and looked instead at the celebrities. Sayaka, though, focused her attention on the giant edifice hovering above their heads in the middle of the park.

Taking an unobstructed view of the miracle structure would make anybody suck in their breath in wonder. First of all, the legs holding up the enormous building.

According to the ward press releases, each of the legs rested on four square yards of land. Though invisible to the naked eye, they were perched on steel cylinders a yard in diameter buried in the ground. The legs reached skywards from the center of the cylinders, themselves only four inches across.

Structural engineers had speculated that the whole thing must weigh fifty million tons. No matter how hardened and reinforced, the four-inch-wide wires couldn't possibly support that much mass.

But the master of this mansion had accomplished exactly that. The most august of the scientific societies appealed to the know-nothing bureaucrats, and were told that only those on the invitation list would be allowed in. There were no scientists on the list.

The wire-like legs rose until they faded into faint lines before reaching the smooth silver "plate" that formed the base of the tower. No joints or seams were visible. The surface appeared perfectly smooth. The material seemed to be the same as the legs. Magnetic resonance and ultrasonic imaging had been conducted in secret, and had revealed nothing.

Starting slightly above the “plate,” the lowest part of the base of the building surrounded the center as it rose up. A single room of this structure was a flat section covering over four acres and standing thirty feet high and made out of marble. The two “flights” of rooms combined to form a wide, winding staircase—connected here and there to the wires to trace an elegant arc through the air.

One glance at the building prompted a scholar from Israel to proclaim: “The Hanging Gardens of Babylon!” And was all more astonished to learn of the name appended to the invitations. He had recalled one of the “Seven Wonders of the World,” so-named two thousand years before by the Greek mathematician, Philon of Byzantium.

In the sixth century B.C., in the kingdom of Babylon in the south of Mesopotamia, King Nebuchadnezzar II built the gardens in the middle of the desert to please his queen, who had been born in the mountains. The gardens rose three hundred and fifty feet high. The numerous terraces on the man-made bluff were adorned with flowers and fountains. Onlookers could imagine that, from afar, it was suspended in midair, such that it was also known as “The Floating Gardens of Babylon.”



Now, twenty-five centuries later, this building ruling the air over Demon City Shinjuku was surely a restoration of the original.

A sharp-eyed cameraman and reporter picked Kyoya and Sayaka out of the crowd. Eluding the mobile police guards holding them back, they got up close and pushed a mic into Sayaka's face.

"A word for our viewers," the reporter said.

"Hey," said Kyoya. He turned to the camera and blinked. "Yo, Shiratori, Kayama," he said, calling out his friends' names. "You watching?" He flashed a V-sign.

"Wasn't asking you," the reporter said, inserting himself between Kyoya and Sayaka. "Miss, could you tell us why you received an invitation?"

Kyoya clapped him on the shoulder. "Go ahead, ask me."

"Put a cork in it."

No sooner had the reporter shrugged him off but he found himself sinking to the ground. He had suddenly gone numb from his shoulder down to his legs.

"You'll be okay in five minutes."

Kyoya reached out to touch the body of the cameraman, whose entire attention was focused on Sayaka. At that moment, a grave and dignified voice floated down from above.

"Welcome to my humble abode. I see that you have all chosen to attend, and for that I am deeply thankful. Inside I have prepared delights to satisfy every expectation. Feel free to spend as much time as your schedules will allow."

"Kyoya-san."

Sayaka took hold of his arm. Kyoya grinned affectionately and said, "Here," and moved her hand to his left. He had the wooden sword — Asura — in his right. He had to keep that free.

Upon hearing the voice from above, the boisterous crowd went silent. Doors that led to what must be a foyer at the base of the tower—like the upside-down bell of a morning glory—slid open to the right and left. A band of light spilled

out of the opening and poured down in front of the guests, connecting the ground and the air.

“Please climb aboard,” the voice said.

The prime minister was first in line. Of course, this one was a body double. After a moment of human hesitation, with all the dignity befitting the leader of a country, he stepped onto the ribbon of light rising skyward. He swayed a bit, then the prime minister—his double—followed the path into the air.

The guards hastily clambered after him. The crowd of close to a thousand surged forward and hopped on one after the other.

At the end of the line, Kyoya and Sayaka stood in front of the ribbon. The cameraman focused the lens on them. Sayaka seemed to have become the center of his attention.

Up to a few minutes ago, the video transmissions from within Shinjuku had come to naught. The magical miasma that engulfed this city suppressed all electronic waves. Now, although filled with static, the images somehow got through. That young man had dampened the interference.

The two stepped onto the ribbon. After an unsteady moment, they were already a yard in the air and rising at a brisk pace, Kyoya estimated about ten miles an hour.

“What is this?” Sayaka wondered, looking down at her feet.

“Not light. My senses tell me it’s a fluid.”

“Water?”

“Something like that. Moor the air in place and flow a concentrated molecular thickener across it. The glow must come from the air being bound in place and then manipulating its physical properties. Whatever it is, it sure does make you think.”

“About who’s behind it all.”

“The boss of Babylon.”

“Babylon,” Sayaka repeated to herself, as if trying to convince herself that it was all actually there.

Below them came the howls of beasts mingled with the siren calls of the lost souls of the park. *Come down and join us*, they cried.

The front foyer approached, as big as the lobby of a grand hotel. And at last, the two were drawn inside Demon Palace Babylon.

Part Two: The Masked Lord

I

The milky white light filled the hall. Murmurs arose here and there in the crowd, expressions of surprise.

“This guy is something else,” Kyoya said, in honest admiration.

This was the kind of edifice built in ancient times by absolute monarchs. The stone pillars rose up like a forest of trees. Beyond the “trees,” water sparkled in a man-made lake. In the lake floated a small, swan-like boat, against a background of endless green and a deep blue sky.

The columns, the floor, the great statues of ancient gods found here and there—all were carved with extraordinary artistry and skill. The effect was truly as if they had stumbled into an enchanted castle. What kept it from descending into a child’s fairy tale was the ghostly aura that ruled the hall.

“Look at the ceiling. From the outside, it’s no more than thirty feet high. From this perspective, it goes on forever.”

Sayaka’s amazement was shared by Kyoya. “I’m not surprised, considering what else he’s built here. Seems the master of this place can manipulate space in four dimensions.”

“Neat.”

“No idea what’s going to show up next, but in any case it’s probably gonna be out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault,” Kyoya quickly added.

Though they entered the grounds without any trouble, what awaited them weighed heavily on their hearts. It was hard to say how far the swing of a wooden sword would take them.

The noise of the crowd suddenly ceased. A warning sound reverberated around them. It arose from a big statue of a god on their left.

“Open your mouths!”

The words rang forth in a chorus of voices. Before the echoes had died away, from the mouth of the old god a human shadow burst forth and landed with perfect timing on the right palm of the hands that had been till then folded across its chest.

But more startling than the style of his arrival was the face rising out of the metallic gown. The man was wearing a golden mask.

Slits in the mask revealed the eyes and mouth. The eyes inside, clear and dark and cold, sent a shiver down the spine. The crowd composed itself and fell silent.

“Welcome to my home,” spoke that same, undeniable voice. “First of all, I would like to thank you again. All those invited are, according to their *stated* names, here in attendance. Those assembled here today shall experience the kind of joys that can be known in the world below. However, *only* those I have actually invited.”

An agitated ripple ran through the people. The masked man raised his hands and quelled the uproar, hands that looked altogether human.

“Unfortunately, those whom I would have otherwise held in affection and esteem have not only forged their names, but altered their appearances and injected a criminal element into these celebrations. I shall only open the door of my beloved home to those whom I love.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than came the flapping of wings overhead. A woman screamed. A black silhouette descended and took a firm hold of her shoulders. The wings beat the air again, and another noise arose, that of several bodies being borne aloft.

The problem was not so much what was being dragged, but what was doing the dragging. A blue beast with gray wings, a smaller member of the species that was known in the old fairy tales as a gremlin. The yard-long creatures picked up full-grown adults and took off for the distant ceiling.

Though there weren't that many gremlins, they were efficient porters and their uncanny strength was more than enough. The number of people in attendance diminished in a flash.

"Rest assured," the masked man said blithely. "They will be returned unharmed to the ground. I have no need for pretenders here. To those who remain I will reveal the wonders of my home. Come. The party begins."

The several dozen left—the standins and pretenders and guards having been whisked away—swayed back and forth. The floor beneath their feet was moving. However it looked like granite, it was a flowing substance like that ribbon of light stretched out beneath them. Like a moving sidewalk, only infinitely more pleasant.

"Where are we going?" asked Sayaka.

"I guess to the party," Kyoya answered blandly. He was ready to leave now. Some guy in a mask and his weird mansion didn't much pique his interest. He'd rather be home munching on *senbei* and reading manga.

Moving between a giant stone pillar and a statue, the sidewalk brought them to another hall. They passed through an open gate without any doors. A ripple ran through the throng.

They were definitely in a banquet hall. Countless tables piled with strange delicacies, foods that none of them had seen before. And standing at attention around them, hostesses in revealing dresses and waiters wearing tuxedos and sparkling smiles, so pretty and handsome that a passerby would want to stop and hug them.

But what drew exclamations of wonder from the mouths of the guests was the great basin in the middle of the hall. It was fifteen feet deep, the bottom covered with bare earth. The oval of at least four hundred square yards looked like a small sports arena.

"Well, everybody, let us begin with a light repast," said the masked lord of the mansion, having at some point already arrived. "Three hundred became a thousand, and then a mere fifty. Disappointing, yes, but a hundred fakes cannot equal one real diamond. Besides—"

He glanced over the assembled group, his eyes focusing on Kyoya and Sayaka. Sayaka felt a cold chill down her spine—as if the eyes of the masked man were boring into her heart.

The enigmatic look soon turned away. As if calming the concerns of all those assembled, the masked man said in a dignified voice, “My wishes will soon be fulfilled. In the meantime, please, eat and enjoy.”

The dinner began. The cuisine could be described as nothing short of miraculous.

“What ingredients is he using?” a world-famous food critic wondered out loud. “I can’t help feeling envious.”

“No idea. How does he bring out such flavors? The seasoning? The oil? What era does this cooking come from?” That was the chef at a five-star hotel, combing his fingers through his white hair.

“It tastes *so* good,” Sayaka practically squealed.

Watching her with a disinterested expression, Kyoya scanned their surroundings, his eyes lighting up as he saw the masked man approaching.

“It is so nice to see you here,” he said with a polite bow. The greeting did not come across as the usual condescension to their youth, but as true courtesy.

“Thanks,” Kyoya grinned.

Sayaka nodded her head respectfully. “We appreciate being invited to such a splendid banquet.”

“If I had my druthers, I would have invited only you.”

“Um—” Sayaka responded, her cheeks flushing.

Alarmed by the possibility that Sayaka might unexpectedly have a thing for middle-aged guys, Kyoya put on a warning expression.

“But,” she continued, “why did you invite me and the others in the first place?”

All at once, she cut to the heart of the matter.

“All the relevant reasons will come to light later.” The eyes deep within the

mask seemed to smile.

He'd ducked the question, leaving Kyoya all the more put out.

"Kyoya Izayoi-kun?"

"Yeah."

"The rumors have reached even this newcomer's ears that you are a practitioner of the rare talents of *nenpo*."

"Well, ah, sure."

The masked man directed his attention to Kyoya's right hand. "And that is Asura. Could I?"

"Go ahead."

A strong hand reached out—and stopped.

"What?"

He let his hand fall to his side instead, and turned away from the sword. "It seems not to have an affinity for me. Unfortunately."

"Sure," said Kyoya, though his voice communicated that he had no idea. "By the way, is the reason you invited me still a mystery?"

"No." The masked man looked at Kyoya and spoke quietly. The kind of voice that made Sayaka turn a bit pale. A commotion behind them caught their attention. "Ah, the show begins," he said, turning around. "Please enjoy yourself. Till we meet again."

The begowned man slipped back into the crowds.

"That guy gives me the creeps," Kyoya said.

"How's that?" Sayaka said, her breathing a bit rough.

Kyoya switched Asura to his left hand and shook his right. "Feeling's gone right out of it, from that guy only getting his hand close. If he'd actually touched it, might have been a lot worse."

He glanced over at the basin. Men in armor were standing in the middle of the oval. Kyoya could make out one person to the left and three to the right. They

were about the same size, though they carried different weapons. The three on the right had long swords. The one on the left, a lance. The swordsmen wore black armor. The lancer's was dark blue.

They had appeared at some point and would be putting on some sort of performance.

"So this is the entertainment. Interesting," said Kyoya, massaging his right hand with his left. He was obviously looking forward to it.

"But it's a sword fight," Sayaka observed darkly.

"Aw, relax. It's a show. I'm sure they've taken the edge of those weapons off. The lance too—"

The rest of the sentence stuck in his throat, as he noticed that the armored knight facing the other three was the one who'd dueled with Mephisto and then picked a fight with him.

"Now then, everybody!" The masked lord's voice spilled out of the air. "The first act begins, more exciting and thrilling than anything you will ever witness in the world below."

The guests had already ascertained the nature of the performance and pushed to the edge of the basin. Kyoya and Sayaka tagged along as well.

"One way or another, not your regular sporting event," said Kyoya.

Ten feet separated the four. Based on the length of the weapons alone, the lancer would have the advantage. But considering number and size, the swordsmen were hardly lacking.

"Man, this is giving me the shivers," said a well-known business writer, his face flushed with anticipation. "For a bunch of robots, they're really selling the emotion."

"They really are," agreed a voluptuous actress, famous mostly for her physical assets. "It's like—like that ancient Roman thingy."

"The Coliseum."

"Yeah, that's it!" She licked her lips.

A cruel air enshrouded them. The tension and curiosity rose to a fevered pitch.

The black knights suddenly moved, fanning out around the dark blue knight. One lunged at him from the right. With a *whoosh* of wind, the swing of his sword swept out a radius of no less than six feet.

Without even looking at him, the blue knight swung his lance. The lateral blow made contact. The right-handed knight had switched the weapon to his left hand.

The altogether strange sound of steel against steel, like a mallet striking a drum, rang out from the black knight's abdomen. Like a doll tossed through the air, the black knight flew a good twenty yards and struck its head against the rim of the basin.

“What the—!”

“That is—!”

“Blood!” a woman screamed.

From the cracks in the armor—fallen in a heap like a grotesque mannequin, dripped a red liquid that moved out in a spreading stain. This was anything but a fight among robots.

Above the heads of the spectators, his presence forgotten in the spectacle before them, a voice said, “Relax. That blood is artificial. Those you see fighting before you are nothing more than synthetic life forms built here in my home.”

A collective sigh of relief dissolved the building tension. As if to rend that apart, the black knight on the left jumped up. At the same time, the third brandished his sword and charged straight on.

The blue knight met the simultaneous attacks from the ground and air with a single turn of the lance. The terrible ferocity of the arc repelled the descending sword and slammed against the head of the knight on the ground.

Somebody screamed as the head sailed into the air like a comet. It was still in mid-flight when the blue knight spun the demonic lance again and speared the knight through the chest as it tumbled to the ground.

The mouths of the guests opened in a silent shout. A second later, the blue

knight had hoisted the body into the air in an atrocious boast of his victory.

The spectators turned away their faces.

The blue knight shook the lance, digging it deeper into the black knight, who writhed on the end of the spike like the impaled meal of a butcher bird. Even a synthetic life form could feel pain.

“Stop it!”

A stern and angry voice rippled through the perverse atmosphere. They all gulped as a young man jumped from the stands and down into the pit.

“Quit clowning around, you homicidal maniac!” came the coolly condescending command.

The blue knight just as calmly turned his attention to Kyoya Izayoi. The demonic lance faced off against Asura.

In a place unseen murmured a voice unheard, “And now the second act begins, in which the interloper is obliterated.”

II

The dark blue knight was enormous. The grotesque combination of horse and armor only amplified the impression.

Right now, facing off against him fifteen feet away, in the eyes of onlookers intoxicated by food and wine and the atrocious smell of blood, Kyoya Izayoi looked positively diminutive. One stomp of the mad stallion's hooves would send him flying.

Any rational person would say the same. Nobody noticed the knight and horse taking a small step back. This wasn't the horse's initiative. The knight had tugged on the reins. Perhaps without realizing it himself.

He alone knew the hidden skills of this seemingly insignificant high school student. The *nenpo* of Kyoya Izayoi.

As if coming to his senses, the knight brandished the lance in his right hand and whipped it around. The synthetic soldier skewered on the end flew off and landed next to Kyoya. Its twitching death throes continued for a spell, then ceased.

"Freakazoid psycho killer," said Kyoya, fearlessly returning the cold gaze peering down at him through the slits in the helmet, then turning away.

"Wait!" The loud voice filling the hall stopped the crowd's expressions of relief and Kyoya in his tracks. It was none other than the lord of this magical palace, the masked lord of the manor. "What a wonderful performance! Absolutely wonderful. The courage to face that knight alone is commendable. And a chivalrous spirit unable to abide such atrocities, even if committed by androids, makes it all the more so."

It took an unscrupulous kind of cowardice to say such a thing, when he himself must have ordered the atrocities in the first place.

“Reckless courage, however, is foolish courage. You surely did not venture where angels fear to tread without being assured of victory. How about it? Why not put your true talents on display for our guests here?” A murmur shot through the crowd. A moment later, “What about it, everybody?”

A thunderous burst of applause followed. Ordinarily, caught between a rock and a hard place, Kyoya would have jumped into the fray. Though given the hackneyed and conniving nature of the proposal, would he nevertheless rise to the bait?

Kyoya smiled. To be sure, a little flattery worked wonders on him, but in a situation like this, raising his hand and flashing a V sign was a bit too much. Even Sayaka shot him a *you’ve got to be kidding* look.

“Rest assured,” said the masked man. “It’s all part of the show. I’m sure he will pull his punches where appropriate. If there’s a little slip-up here and there, it will be duly compensated.”

Laughter and cheers arose, and then died away.

Kyoya gave Asura a casual practice swing, just once, and yet it sent an electric charge through the gentlemen and ladies in attendance, like the flowing of a cold, clear stream.

The crowd fell silent. And not only them, but a tension in the formless presence of the masked lord could be felt as well.

The disarming smile of an amiable honors student hadn’t vanished from his face when Kyoya Izayoi said in a cool voice, “I’m also one of the invited guests. I wasn’t eager to so rudely intervene in the fun. I would have walked away, but will happily answer the challenge. Keep in mind, though, that however he may go easy on me, I won’t return the favor. I wouldn’t be standing here otherwise.”

He spoke with unexpected force and fluency, and turned on the spot to face the knight. No applause or cheers greeted him this time. The combat unfolding in front of their eyes had ceased to be a sideshow and became a life and death struggle.

Kyoya lowered his arms to his sides in a natural stance. The blue knight remained motionless.

As the two relaxed in the final seconds before the war commenced, the spectators couldn't help but sense the threads of their dreadful auras tying them inexorably together, binding them to the impending moment as surely as it did Sayaka.

One famous female critic could not abide the rising tension and swooned. Reflexively throwing out an arm to catch herself, her hand hit the plate and knife she'd placed on a nearby table. The knife went flying through the air, drawing a graceful arc and smashing into a big bowl several yards away with a clamorous jangle.

At that moment, the black horse snorted. With the war cry lingering in the air, the horse and rider kicked against the sand and raced toward Kyoya like a rocket. Twice what they'd shown their previous opponents, faster than the fastest racehorse.

The blue knight thrust his lance at Kyoya's chest. The air hummed. Startled shouts erupted from the mouths of the onlookers.

They would have all sworn they saw the spear tip penetrate his rib cage, and the lance trace an arc through the air like a giant needle through a pin cushion, the ferocious centrifugal force finally flinging Kyoya's body over the stands to a certain death.

But that was not what happened.

They saw Kyoya leaping straight up, like the surging current of a great river suddenly reversing course. The wooden sword he'd been holding in his right hand he now held in both hands high over his head. And swung down.

The blue knight couldn't skirt the blow. The center of the blade connected squarely with the top of his helmet.

The loud *clang* struck their ears. Invisible sparks stung their eyes.

"Yes!" Sayaka cried in triumph.

Kyoya pushed off in midair. The blue knight leaned wildly over. Sayaka had fought alongside Kyoya before, and knew instinctually that he'd hit the bull's-eye with the kind of power that would incapacitate just about any monster.

As Kyoya landed in the sand a dozen yards away, the blue knight toppled over. Before Sayaka could react to Kyoya's wary, sword-ready stance as he bounced to his feet, she looked at the knight and her congratulatory cry turned to surprise and fear.

The knight righted himself.

He'd been leaning almost horizontally in the baroque saddle, but still held onto the lance, supporting himself only with the reins in his left hand. He yanked himself to the vertical and again leveled the lance. The horse's forefeet pranced on the ground, antsy for round two to begin.

Kyoya was amazed but impressed. He'd pinned the initial attack beneath his arm. He didn't fight it, but jumped in concert with the direction of the motion. As expected, the momentum took him right over the knight's head, where he delivered the telling blow with Asura.

The *nen* he'd poured into Asura didn't deal a killing blow, because he hadn't detected that intent in the opponent's thrust either. Thinking he was being taken for granted, at first he was resolved to take no prisoners. He'd let up at the last moment because he was, almost despite himself, a good person underneath all that attitude.

However, no matter who he might be fighting, even striking with his upper arms alone there was no way the recipient should have been able to remain conscious. Absorbing physical energy in stages, the propagating thought waves directly impacted the living thing within, regardless of the thickness of the defenses.

What sort of being was this knight who could take such a hit to the head and come so quickly to his senses?

His opponent must be thinking the same thing.

A white gash ran vividly across the crown of his helmet. Having reseated himself in the saddle, he still swayed like bamboo grass in a stiff breeze. Needless to say, he could not be looking forward to a renewed attack. The *nenpo* of Kyoya Izayoi was a fearful thing indeed.

"What do you say?" Kyoya called out. "Shall we call it a day? I think the

android's had enough. It's no skin off my nose, but I don't care much for those who toy with people for the amusement of others. Keep this up, and somebody's gonna get hurt for real."

Kyoya let down his guard and turned to the horse and rider as nimbly as a skater gliding on ice.

Something burned through the air. Asura slashed sideways in a purely reflexively action. The blue flash of lightning bent almost at right angles and sank into the ground next to Kyoya's feet. Only afterward came the sound of striking metal.

What Kyoya had deflected—sticking out of the earth was a bronze-blue arrow.

The air was filled with a succession of shrieks. Asura flashed. The earth shuddered. Two more arrows sprouted around him.

Nobody saw who was shooting them, just as nobody saw Kyoya deflecting the flying shafts—that was how fast the attacks came and were parried. Kyoya closed his eyes. In that state of non-being, his sixth sense came into play. The speed of the arrows was such that detecting them would have otherwise been impossible.

Then came the sound of hooves.

At some point, two men on horseback had lined up on the rim of the basin facing Kyoya. They'd undoubtedly emerged from a hidden passageway while the onlookers were caught up in the contest between Kyoya and the blue knight, appearing out of the nothing like ghosts. That alone was enough to send a collective shiver down their backs.

They both wore the same design of armor as the blue knight. Facing Kyoya, the one on the right was the color of the dusky setting sun, down to his eyes. The eyes of the one on the left, deep green. Kyoya didn't need to note the enormous bow beneath his arm to know that he had fired those three arrows.

But what made all those watching quake was not merely the arrival of these new foes, with skills at archery that must equal those of the blue knight. It was their strange appearance.

The right arm of the green knight holding the bow jutted out from his waist.

Beside it grew the left arm. And another pair of arms a bit above them in the center of the sternum. And finally the two normally expected at the shoulders, making six altogether.

There were no arrows in the left hands, but in tubes affixed to his back. In easy reach of the three arms awaited more fletched bronze shafts. With these three arms operating simultaneously on a single target, the inevitable outcome would be near impossible to avoid, even for Kyoya Izayoi.

The weirdness of the red knight was also in his arms. He didn't have six. They were extraordinarily long. His head and torso were similar in size to the other two, but his arms were three times the usual length. They reached his thighs and angled forward, with his hands grasping the reins. The impression he gave was that of a human spider or praying mantis, that filled the hearts of the onlookers with an unpleasant horror.

This knight's weapon was a long sword strapped to his back. A very long sword—ten feet long. The hilt and scabbard poked out from his back. A fencer would need arms that long to wield it. Or a fencer with arms that long would demand such a sword.

Together with the sword, his reach extended twenty feet. At that distance, he could best the greatest swordsman in the world with a single swipe. Including Kyoya Izayoi.

“Well done, boy.”

The voice came from the red knight's helmet, the voice of a mighty man. Though there were unnatural resonances in it as well, as if electronically amplified.

“Men and women, old and young alike, you are the first to fight Valen even to a draw. Yours is an impressive and admirable will. I say this only to preserve Valen's good name, but he went in unprepared. Seeing as you are but a child, he moderated his initial attack.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kyoya said brightly. The red knight's words dissolved the anger like a spring breeze. “I figured the old guy had a whole lot more in him from the start. But that's that and this is this. You a friend of his? You want a piece of me too?”

“You think highly of yourself, boy.” This dramatically different voice could freeze the air. It belonged to the archer with six arms. “I shot those three arrows at you using one arm, and with time to spare. Are you confident that you could escape unscathed taking three at the same time?”

“Hard to say,” Kyoya responded breezily. The ready answer was enough to make the green knight look quizzically at the red knight. “I may take one at best, two at worst. But I could probably return two to sender. So, green guy, could you duck two?”

The green knight fell silent. The high schooler’s impertinence aroused neither anger nor cold laughter. He didn’t doubt the nature of his powers.

“Not bad, boy.” The red knight shook with laughter. “Our loss. We shall withdraw gracefully. If you want a fight, it should be in an arena that gives us all much more room to move. We shall meet again.”

“Three against one?” Kyoya frowned.

“Nothing of the sort. We detest cowardly actions above all.”

“No problem, then. Anytime, anyplace.”

Everybody watching could *feel* the red knight smiling inside his helmet. He turned to the still shaky blue knight and said, “Can you proceed?”

He nodded. The three wheeled their horses around. There was a last flash of hatred from deep within the blue knight’s helmet as he turned his back to Kyoya, but that was all he had to say.

The red knight stopped and twisted back in the saddle and said, “We haven’t properly introduced ourselves. I am Vian. The green knight is called Mathias. We already know your name, Kyoya Izayoi.”

By the time Kyoya made it to the edge of the basin, the three had vanished, as if a screen had suddenly descended between them. Returning to the banquet hall, he was greeted by a round of applause. Slaps on the back, cries of praise came from all around for the splendid kid.

Kyoya only wanted to find Sayaka. It took him a good five minutes to determine that she had disappeared.

Part Three: The Ancient Goddess

I

Around the same time the two new opponents faced off against Kyoya, Sayaka went looking for the masked lord of the manor. She intended to have him put a stop to the violence once and for all.

Scanning her surroundings, she spotted a door off in the distance, and something glittering moving toward it. Only after she set off in pursuit, without really thinking about what she was doing, did she become aware of something odd going on.

He was walking. She was running. And yet she couldn't close the distance between them. She heard the heavy sound of the door closing behind her, it didn't occur to her to turn around. Driven by an impulse she didn't even understand, Sayaka ran after the walking man.

Imposing statues rose up on her left and right—she seemed to be moving down a kind of corridor—she seemed to be moving past a lake brimming with mysterious blue water.

Finally, exhausted in body and mind, having closed the distance between them not at all, she stopped. She was surrounded by a blue light. Breathing ragged breaths, Sayaka looked curiously at the shadow stretching out on the marble beneath her feet. The feelings were hard to describe—emotions that in such a situation should have hardly come to mind.

“Are you tired?” asked a teasing voice.

Sayaka raised her head. In front of her, no closer than before, she could see the back of the lord of the manor. In the same direction, deeper within the blue light, wavered a stone staircase.

Without any logical reason, Sayaka thought of climbing it.

“Are you tired, Semiramis?”

“No,” Sayaka answered. “Not at all.” Then it struck her: *Semiramis*? Who was that? He’d posed the question to somebody else, and yet she had answered.

“What strength and spirit. There is a terrace perfect for viewing the moon just ahead. There is a divan there for you, and plum wine.”

Sayaka was all the more confused by the man in the mask. A terrace for moon viewing? It was still daylight outside, past three in the afternoon. And a divan for her?

“You still don’t remember, Semiramis?” His voice was suffused with a sorrow that made her want to cover her ears.

“I believe you are mistaken,” Sayaka said. “I’m—that name—”

“I understand. All is as you say. But all is also as I say.”

“No,” Sayaka said, trying to dispel the dark clouds gathering in her chest.

“Very well. The time has not yet come. But behold your shadow.”

Sayaka reflexively looked down at the ground. She saw her shadow. Her hair appeared to be adorned with ribbons of fine fabric. A sleeveless dress reached to her ankles.

“What in the world—”

She blinked several times. And then with a prayer in her heart, peered down again. Her long hair swayed about her waist. Her own hair. Her shoulders slumped in disappointment. Relief mingled with a curious kind of pathos in her heart, which she did her best to ignore.

“No matter, you must come, Miss Sayaka Rama. I will show you alone what no one has ever seen.”

“I have to get back. We should go back.”

“And why is that?”

“You must stop that gladiator bout in the arena.”

A vain request, to be sure. Without a backwards glance, the lord of the manor house said, “If my calculations are correct, the thing has already been settled, after a most unexpected fashion.”

“How could you—” Sayaka began to retreat.

“Please excuse me.”

Courteous to the end, he bowed and turned around.

“Wait.”

The plea faded into the distance. The air shook above her head, followed by a strange screeching sound. She looked up. A creature with bat-like wings dropped down on her. A gremlin!

Sayaka felt a pinch in her shoulders as she rose into the air. The carrying capacity of these legendary creatures could be attested to by the spies and agents among the invited guests who’d been disposed of earlier.

She considered using the paralyzer setting in her laser ring, but her body was already a good fifteen feet in the air and rising fast. A fall from this distance would break a bone or two. So she resigned herself to going wherever the gremlin was going.

Kyoya-san should be okay. There’s no way he’d lose to those armored creatures. That’s what she believed. She gave less thought to what would happen to herself after this.

The gremlin soared elegantly through the air and reached the top of the staircase. They were headed in the wrong direction, and there was nothing she could do about it, but Sayaka couldn’t help thinking this wasn’t a bad way to get around.

At the very top of the staircase was an enormous pool, in which bobbed a number of pretty boats festooned with bronze flower petals.

Sayaka and the gremlin turned to the right and rushed toward a great glass door. Just before colliding with the door, it opened wide. Sayaka was drawn into the invigorating air. She was startled not just by its cool taste, but by the great blackness that reached out and out before her.

Stars twinkled above. The heavens were full of stars that looked ready to pour down out of the Milky Way. Lights twinkled below. When the darkness crystallized, it must glitter like this as well.

The endless points of light took hold of Sayaka's youthful aesthetic. Standing on the green-covered terrace, she was intoxicated by the dreamlike spectacle. And yet her nervous system was definitely not asleep.

Hearing footsteps behind her, she spun like a lithesome top to face the man in the golden mask.

"I thought you should see this," said the lord of Babylon, with a word of apology. He pointed at the amalgam of light and dark and looked at Sayaka. "The stars of the night, the lights of the earth, are yours and mine—no, yours alone, if you so choose."

"I don't understand what you are saying," Sayaka answered forthrightly. "You mean you will pull the stars down from the sky and steal the lights from off the earth for me?"

"That is correct."

"Well, that's nice. But not scientifically possible."

"That is also correct."

The lord's face twitched in a smile beneath the mask. "But the day is still the day, and this is all an illusion."

"I know that," said Sayaka, though she hadn't actually known that.

"Do you remember?" asked the mask, ignoring the bands of light.

"Remember what?"

"Remember that you once stood at this terrace with me and looked at the moon and the stars and the world below."

"Pull yourself together. You've obviously got a fevered brain." Sayaka slowly backed away.

The mask followed. "You have forgotten why I built this garden in the sky?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't meet whatever expectations you had of me."

"Well, we have all the time in the world. It will come to you eventually. For now, let us drink the night away."

"It's still daytime."

“You needn’t take everything so literally.”

He stepped to the side. Behind him, a white round table appeared. Sayaka smelled the sweet aroma of fragrant wood on the night breezes.

“I built these gardens for my wife, who came from a country of mountains and forests. Because, aside from a few touches of blue and green, the kingdom I ruled was known more for its vast deserts and wastelands.”

There were the unique resonances of a long-ago loss in the mask’s voice.

“You mean the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. That would make you Nebu—”

Sayaka closed her mouth before saying the rest of the name. Because the golden mask had held out a silver chalice in front of her eyes.

The aromatic scent assaulted her nostrils and burned a numbing path into the center of her brain. Sayaka took the chalice and raised it to her lips. The cool liquid slid down her throat.

“That is your favorite drink. Though this time the ingredients are slightly different.”

Sayaka felt a keen sense of surprise. But not one that connected that shock with “danger.”

“You should return.” The implacable voice of the mask seemed to come from far away. “Return to the you I know best. Remember. Remember the reason I came here. The reason I chose Demon City.”

Sayaka collapsed to the floor. The golden mask quickly moved closer to hold her up, then laid her down on the purple divan next to the table.

“And so the first step has been taken,” he said to no one. “Now we wait.”

Kyoya slipped out of the hall. From the effusive chatter, the guests had already put the death match behind them. He scanned the silent hallway but couldn’t see Sayaka anywhere.

“I guess I’d better give it a shot,” he muttered to himself.

The shadow that crossed his face reflected his confidence and determination. He closed his eyes tightly. The air around him froze in place. If anybody had

come within a yard of him at this time, they'd have been hit with the equivalent of an electric shock, be knocked unconscious, and likely bodily thrown backwards.

Such was the state of his terrific mental concentration.

In this state of no-mind, Kyoya gripped Asura and stabbed it into the floor. The tip of the wooden sword buried itself in the marble. The sword didn't chip or splinter.

"Nenpo lost shadow," Kyoya murmured, and pulled out the sword.

No crack or fissure marred the floor. A shadow shaped like a willow leaf affixed itself there, outlining the tapered edge of the blade. Kyoya opened his eyes. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He didn't pause to wipe it off, but reached into the pocket of his shirt and took out a single strand of hair.

"Sayaka's. Lost shadow, find its owner."

He brushed the strand of hair against the "willow leaf." The shadow absorbed it and shot across the floor at high speed.

Kyoya gave it a three foot head start, then took off after it. This "nenpo lost shadow" was definitely headed where the man in the golden mask had last taken Sayaka. The shadow of Asura, having been imbued with Kyoya's *nen* and assimilated a part of Sayaka, now turned into some kind of predatory animal.

Down a corridor lined with enormous statues—past a lake, the wind rippling the surface—where Sayaka had gone they went too. After running for five minutes, a wide long staircase rose up before Kyoya and the "lost shadow."

They'd come to the foot of the staircase leading to the moon viewing terrace.

"Stop," Kyoya told the lost shadow.

He stopped himself to collect his breath. In any other time or place, he would hardly be winded by a five-minute dash. His ragged fatigue was the result of creating the lost shadow. The focus and concentration required to animate even a two-dimensional object with pseudo-being and give it the ability to accomplish its purpose drew deeply on his mental and physical reserves.

Compared to that, the straightforward business of crossing swords with a

demon knight was far and away less draining.

He took two and then three deep breaths, and was about to set off once again when a huge mass moved in front of him. In a flash, Kyoya jumped back ten feet, drawing Asura as he landed.

The staircase rose up in front of him. It was an imposing mass as well. But it wasn't moving. Kyoya understood. It wasn't the staircase, but an enemy at the top. A monster? No, not exactly. An evil presence, to be sure, but lacking that sense of living vitality that even a monster possessed.

Then what?

Kyoya focused his gaze. The flight of stairs rose fifteen feet above him. The very top rapidly warped and swayed. Something white struck the steps below, coursing down with terrific force.

Water.

He couldn't have known at that instant, but the top of the stairs had become a wide pool. Water now poured down it. The raging currents had reached the middle of the flight of stairs, kicking up spray on each step, when a mountain of water welled up at the very top and plunged down at Kyoya.

It was water to be sure, but with this much force and speed behind it, even a heavyweight wrestler would have been reduced to all fours, scrambling like a baby before being swept away.

The crest of the wave rose up several feet above him. Asura sprang forth.

The blade tore through the wall of water. That rent traveled back up the stairs to its source, the parted waves turning at angles away from Kyoya's head. The spray from the waves crashing to the floor around him stung his cheeks.

With a martial cry, like a canvas sail tearing in two, Kyoya swung Asura at the mass at the top of the stairs. He felt the swing connect. The massive thing reeled. And then that sense of presence winked out.

Kyoya brought Asura back to the *en garde* position, but the tip of the sword dropped down, becoming a crutch to prop himself up. The lost shadow and the battle that followed had used up his reserves of mental energy.

For a while, the formless enemy didn't move. But were a new enemy with similar powers to come at him—

Kyoya held his breath, steeled himself against the vertigo that came from the lack of oxygen, and reinforced his *nen*.

He held it for five seconds more. Hardly sufficient, but it'd have to do for the time being. *Leave the rest for later*, and time should take care of it.

The water spilling down the stairs spread out in broad streams. Kyoya stomped through the puddles and set off running.

II

“Where are you going?”

Kyoya was halfway up the staircase when he heard her quiet voice. Sayaka and the golden mask were standing at the top of the stairs. His initial relief that she appeared safe and sound was soon replaced by one of distinct unease, seeing the dreamlike expression on her pale and lovely face.

Kyoya turned his flashing eyes on the masked man.

“Don’t worry. Rama-san is fine.”

His assurances—as if reading Kyoya’s thoughts—only aroused his anger further, and his glare grew all the more menacing.

“She’s hardly doing *fine*. You’ve got her in some kind of trance. You perform some kind of mojo on her, slip her a roofie?”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

When getting into a brawl, Kyoya was the type who grew calmer as the other guy got hotter. Except that the voice of the mask was as cool as ice.

“Same goes for you, bud. You’re good at not getting to the point. To start with, why don’t you tell us who you really are? Second, why invite all those people here? Lastly, what’s the true reason for this whole charade?”

The mask’s answer was leavened with laughter. “I’m afraid you have watched too many science fiction and adventure shows. This is my home, secured through all the legal and proper procedures. It is only natural that I should invite to my home those people most appropriate to its size and opulence. As for my identity, perhaps you didn’t bother yourself, but I’m sure it’s all there to be found on the Internet. As for my true reasons—”

Kyoya felt himself rising up on the balls of his feet.

“—to throw a party for you all, of course.”

“Why did you kidnap Sayaka—Rama-san?”

“You misunderstand and accuse me falsely. I came here to the terrace to relax. The young lady accompanied me of her own accord.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Well.” The mask said after a meaningful pause, “The more unbelievable fact is that you should have come away from your encounter with the three knights in such good health. How about it? Would you mind demonstrating your miraculous powers to me?”

“Let’s have at it,” Kyoya said readily.

He had his dander up. His *nen* was weak. In this condition, his former opponents would have carried the day. But he was hot-blooded by nature, and anybody who messed with Sayaka was cruising for a bruising.

“What about you? You gonna fight bare-handed?”

“You came bearing that exquisite sword. I am my own weapon.”

“Whatever.”

Kyoya swung Asura. He wasn’t taking his opponent lightly. This young man approached any fight with all due caution. Based on his previous encounter, he had a good idea of the mask’s true powers. This was no time to fold on a weak hand. He wasn’t about to admit the low ebb of his *nen*, and would rather have died than run.

Kyoya nimbly climbed the rest of the stairs. Observing the size and scale of the pool he exclaimed, “Hey, wow.”

The water level was just below the brim. Here was the source of the raging wave from before. Considering the amount, a lot more like it wouldn’t drop the level an inch.

Kyoya stared into the depths of the blue water, looking for something there, but saw nothing in the deep watery depths. One of those invisibility screens that had hid the knights might be deployed here as well.

“Shall we proceed, then?” said the mask.

“Bring it on.”

They stood ten feet apart. The mask left Sayaka where she was. Kyoya moved to the edge of the pool. The edge of the pool was a good six to ten feet wide, a kind of granite shore. The distance between them stayed the same.

Thirty feet away from Sayaka, they stopped.

Kyoya settled into a right *hasso* stance, the left foot forward, the sword raised over his right shoulder. Then slowly brought down the tip, aligning it with the mask’s face.

The mask appeared utterly unperturbed. It wasn’t an act. Even if it was, his ability to perfectly conceal the killer aura emanating from his body was on a par with the very best fighters in the martial arts.

The kind of fighter Kyoya was the least effective against. A weakness, a tell, a way in was simply not evident.

And the unarmed fighting style could be a feint. There was no telling what he had up his sleeve—a laser, a handheld missile. Unleash something like that on him right now and it could well kill him.

No problem. Kyoya could live with that. So to speak. He didn’t understand it, but he was okay with fighting and dying here. A little earlier than scheduled, but it wouldn’t be a bad way to go.

Just as that thought expressed itself in a slight smile, an agitated vibe roiled out of the masked man’s being. The young man’s laid-back manner had shattered his icy resolve.

The opening he was waiting for.

With a shout, Kyoya jumped forward, closing the gap between them in a flash. Though the mask managed to duck at the last second, he practically tripped over his own two feet doing so, and couldn’t set up an immediate counterattack.

Damn, too slow. The thought flashed through his mind, but he kept a poker expression and poured strength into his hands, swinging Asura sideways at the mask’s midsection. He wasn’t pulling his punches. If the blow connected, the

guy wouldn't be moving for a month.

He felt a peculiar reverberation down the shaft. Kyoya was thrown backwards in midair. He didn't have time to execute a soft landing, and broke the fall onto the granite floor with his left shoulder. It was wet, probably because of the water.

Ow.

He kept that reaction bottled up inside too.

“Shit!”

That he shouted out loud. His legs splayed apart at odd angles. He was forced to lean on Asura to stay up.

Rubbing his right hand, the man in the golden mask said, “Had enough?”

He wasn't rubbing very hard. Kyoya hadn't hit him any harder than that. The realization sent a cold chill down his spine that soon transformed to anger. One of his better qualities. But no matter how good, it didn't solve the problem before him.

While still resolved to knock him on his ass, in a corner of his mind, Kyoya contemplated the true nature of the masked man's riposte. He'd sent exactly the same physical impact and mental power invested in the wooden sword back at him.

“Well, do you still want to continue?” the man in the golden mask said scornfully.

Kyoya smiled complacently and said with equal derision, “Hoh. That sure hit the spot.”

“It looks that way, doesn't it?”

“Sure.”

“And why would that be?”

“Guys like you, even given a little leeway, you don't miss a thing. Spot a weakness and you'll go straight at it. Not to mention that you wanted to kill me from the start. The only reason you didn't is because of the way I rang your

skull just now.”

“Idiot.”

“Then step up to the plate. I ain’t dead yet.”

“Fine.”

The mask’s voice was colored with rage. Kyoya’s words had no doubt hit the mark. With unsettled steps, he faced off against Kyoya, still leaning on the wooden sword. Kyoya’s body sunk lower, carefully folding his otherwise numb limbs beneath him, settling to the floor in a cross-legged position.

Asura shot up with a *whoosh* of air. The mask’s legs froze. The tip of the wooden sword swept against the side of his chest.

Rising out of some unknown and bottomless pit of energy, the energy radiating from the body of this enervated high school student immobilized him. When Kyoya should have had no *nen* left to use.

“Bastard.” The first sounds of human pique drifted from the mouth of the mask.

They were both locked in place, each holding the other motionless. Rooted there where they stood, it seemed that an eternity passed.

“Kyoya-san.”

Calling out with a voice like a song, Sayaka ran up to them. The mask had attempted to parry Kyoya’s sword with his arm. At the moment of contact, the shock of psychic power burned away the narcotic spell like the morning mist.

The mask backed away. “That is enough. I shall call a nursing robot. No hard feelings.”

Kyoya raised his pale face and winked. “I’ll take a rain check, then. Don’t pretend to be out.”

“Understood.” With a golden glitter he descended the staircase and vanished out of sight.

“Whoa,” said Kyoya, pitching forward.

Sayaka came up behind him and kept him from falling over. A sweet scent

wafted up. He felt her soft breasts pressed against his back.

“Hey, that tickles,” he said. He had a hard time making his tongue work.

“You’re freezing cold!” Sayaka exclaimed. “Like ice. When did you go swimming?”

Kyoya tried to smile, but his face was bent into a disheveled grimace. He’d bluffed his way out of that mess, though he wasn’t quite sure how. He’d used the last vestiges of his remaining *nen* against the mask, and hadn’t the time or the reserves to restore himself to any kind of fighting condition.

Only that he couldn’t bear getting whipped by the guy coming at him. Luckily, what he had in him had proved enough.

“I dunno,” he muttered in a hoarse voice.

Sayaka exclaimed, “You don’t even know what you did? Your head—”

“Oh, button it,” Kyoya grouched, he thought, to himself.

“That’s not nice,” Sayaka answered sullenly. Who clearly had heard.

Now Kyoya was the one who buttoned it. He really didn’t understand. He indicated with his finger where he wanted to lie down. His head had barely touched the hard stone when he felt it being lifted up and set down on a warm cushion.

He started a bit, the way men do in such situations. Sayaka looked down at him, having made a pillow of her lap. Kyoya averted his eyes from her searching gaze, determined to play the tough guy.

Sayaka smiled at his smoldering awkwardness, remembering with a touch of nostalgia the first time. Racing away in a taxi from Shin-Okubo station to escape a fire-wielding monster, she had lent the exhausted young warrior the use of her lap. That was all she could do. And she wanted more than anything to simply sail off to parts unknown like that.

Reflecting on that rekindled a flame of longing and nostalgia, and Sayaka’s cheeks blushed rose red. Kyoya didn’t notice. He was like that. They were both like that. A sad little smile creased Sayaka’s lips.

“Heave ho,” Kyoya said several minutes later, waking himself up.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he said, his bluntness born of awkwardness. “How about yourself?” he asked, scratching his head.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know,” echoed the surprised Kyoya, gazing at her pale countenance. He hastily cleared his throat.

He’s concerned about me, Sayaka beamed.

As they strolled along, they discussed what had happened up to now. Kyoya mostly kept quiet and listened. When Sayaka had finished talking, he said, “The culprit is probably whatever it was you drank.”

“Probably.”

“What happened, what you saw in that dream, could you describe it a bit more?”

“That’s—um—” She hung her head.

They began to descend the stairway. “I get the idea he lured you out in order to show you what was in that dream. This business with Semiramis, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the vast midnight landscapes—a tool to heighten your awareness of it all. In that light, I know this sounds kinda gross, but it would seem his objective is *you*, Sayaka-chan. Damn, a few more details would sure be useful.”

Kyoya clucked his tongue in frustration.

They stopped halfway down the stairs. Sayaka wasn’t coming with. She was standing still three steps above him. Kyoya furrowed his brow. Sayaka was shaking. This young woman who had thrown herself alone into the Demon City night in order to save the world, and had boldly accepted an invitation to this strange palace—she was trembling.

Kyoya ran up to her. “What’s the matter?”

Sayaka clung to him for support before he finished asking the question, her warm breasts pressing the cool fabric of his damp shirt against his skin.

“I’m so scared,” she wept.

“What’s going on?” Kyoya said, the sense of urgency overshadowing his usual nonchalance.

Sayaka shook her head, sending waves through the cascade of hair around her waist. “I’m remembering. Not everything, but enough. Thousands of people lined up in a wide field and kneeling.”

Her arms tightened around his waist.

“After that, a big shadow—I couldn’t make out its form, but I think human—trampling upon those people. If that was all—if that was all—but the person commanding it, the person ordering the deaths of so many people and laughing at the sight, that person—”

Her words dissolved in a cry. Then she screamed, “—was me!”

III

When the invited guests descended from “Babylon” that evening, Kyoya and Sayaka were among them. They listened without emotion to the effusive exclamations of praise and wonder.

The politicians and businessmen estimated the wealth of the man in the golden mask, and how they could tap into it—

Having viewed dresses created from a completely different perspective, designers once comfortable with traditional patterns mused about monopolizing a “back to the future” movement featuring ancient fashions—

Stars presented with dazzling jewelry now considered this mysterious unknown lord of the manor a celebrity of their own station—

While Kyoya and Sayaka felt only dark clouds closing upon their minds.

Kyoya couldn’t avoid the fact that his *nenpo* hadn’t approached that of his enemy. Sayaka couldn’t shed those bad dreams.

He steamed with anger, wondering what kind of drug the masked man had fed her. Kyoya wanted to search out the golden mask. But considering the funk Sayaka was in, and lingering suspicions that he’d come after her again, he had instead hung out in a corner of the banquet hall and sulked.

He’d mulled over what the enemy was up to, except that admirers of his fighting style kept interrupting. He couldn’t get a moment to himself. But perhaps because he’d intervened, the enemy’s actions toward Sayaka had been forestalled for the time being.

Android dancers had recreated ancient entertainment. Magic shows took conjuring to another level, playing freely with light and sound. Strolling in the shade of the trees. Boating in the lake. Passing the time.

At length, the lord of the manor had rung down the curtain on the festivities.

At the Japan section of the World Federation Government Information Bureau in Azabu, Yamashina met them in person. After they settled down to talk, Kyoya asked, “How are you doing, Sayaka-chan? Feeling better?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Despite her bright face and voice, she didn’t look all that okay. The shock must have been considerable and he was loath to make things any worse, so he didn’t delve into details. But Sayaka bucked up and related everything to Section Chief Yamashina, even asking for treatment to help restore her memory. Specialists at the Information Bureau would be making preparations even now.

“It’d help at times like this to have Mephisto on call,” Kyoya sighed.

Perhaps from fending off the attack from the golden mask, his *nen* was taking its own sweet time restoring itself. And even then, he couldn’t be certain that he’d have the right kind of spiritual energy on tap to strike back at the monster.

More than that—more than anything—were his concerns about Sayaka.

Sayaka looked at him and asked, “Why Mephisto?”

“I have to think he’d come up with some sort of a solution, for both me and you.”

“You think so?”

“He is a doctor. And he does seem to be made out of different stuff.”

“That is true.” A small smile at last turned up the corners of her mouth.

“Yeah, it’s a lot nicer seeing you smile,” said Kyoya, a little verve returning to his voice. “Especially when the person smiling is a babe.”

“Oh, please,” said Sayaka dismissively, but couldn’t help blushing.

Kyoya laughed, a bit too loudly. The same free spirit who’d cop a feel and promise the girl a high school experience worth remembering was completely thrown for a loop by this prim and pretty lady.

“But—” said Sayaka, looking down, her voice dying to a whisper. “Doctor Mephisto isn’t here.”

“That is true too.”

“Just Kyoya-san.”

“Hmm?” What might be called an ominous presentiment raced through his mind. “However—” he said, stroking his chin with great gravity. That was as far as he got. There was no *however*. Nothing more came to mind.

Sayaka sat herself down on the sofa next to him. There was only room for one more person. Reach out and she could touch him. The distance of a single strand of her hair.

“Um—” she said.

“W-what?” Kyoya burst out. Caught off guard, he stared instead at the ceiling.

“Nothing,” Sayaka said.

She didn’t know what came after the “um.” For reasons she couldn’t comprehend, when she really wanted to talk to the one person she wanted to talk to more than anybody else,

Sayaka was sixteen. A woman’s shadow had begun to touch her comely features, accompanied by that richer, more complex scent. A nature that set her apart from other girls could be ascertained at a glance, along with the instinctual urge to shield her from all the pain and sorrow the world had to offer.

Just as they all knew at a glance that the only child of the World Federation president had an iron will and was no prisoner to vapid sentimentality.

Since working at the Philanthropic Hospital in Kawadacho, she’d received five formal proposals—from three of the young hard-working doctors and two of the medical directors—on behalf of their sons, of course.

She turned them all down, though none of them abandoned the effort, sending endless bouquets her way, with invitations to dinners and concerts. She paid them no mind, though it would be less than true to say she never wavered in her convictions.

But at such times, she always recalled *that* face to mind. No matter how far away, he was always in her heart. There had been no promise of him being any closer. Except for now—and he couldn’t be further away.

The door opened. Section Chief Yamashina and five Information Bureau personnel entered the room. The kind of big, tough men that showed up when the going got tough.

“Expecting a fight?” Kyoya said coolly.

The section chief answered with a stern expression of his own. “Based on what you’ve told us, our enemy seems to have Sayaka in his sights.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. How about we skip the obvious?”

“This time around, for reasons that are unclear, she was allowed to safely return, but there is no guarantee that a kidnapping attempt won’t be made in the future. That’s what these bodyguards are for.”

“Huh.” Kyoya nodded.

His sour expression didn’t brighten. He’d figured they were bodyguards from the start. But based on the abilities of the masked man, he doubted a hundred more like them could protect Sayaka. It seemed more a question of whether a thousand ants could stop a tank.

“The memory restoration procedure is ready to begin. This way, please.”

“Gotcha.” Kyoya came to his feet.

He was an outsider, but this was an extreme case, and nobody believed he didn’t belong there. They hadn’t forgotten that this high school student and his sword had saved the world.

They passed down the bioluminescent-lit hallway to the elevators and descended three floors to a door that said: “Memory Restoration Room. Entrance Prohibited.” After five separate computer ID checks, they were allowed inside. When it came to peering inside somebody’s head and rooting around in the past, any purposes other than medical were strictly forbidden.

Such facilities existed in the Information Bureau primarily to recover the memories of agents involved in covert intelligence activities or those of enemy spies, though such purposes were denied in public. That Sayaka and Kyoya were so readily admitted was a sign of the respect Yamashina had for Kyoya’s *nen*.

Inside the room was another room, stocked with strange-looking equipment, overseen by a man dressed in a white lab coat.

“Professor Kurosawa of the Medical Affairs Department,” said Yamashina.

He introduced Kyoya and Sayaka. The old scholar nodded curtly. He had an unkempt air about him. Kyoya didn’t take it in a bad way. It was the kind of welcome he expected from the stubborn mad scientist type.

“Well then, Chief,” the professor said in a loud voice, like a gorilla thumping his chest and marking his territory.

“Well, what?”

“How many laws are we breaking here?”

“Quite a few.”

“So it appears.”

The professor started toward the equipment. He stopped and said over his shoulder, “By the way, Chief, I’ve been meaning to discuss my salary.”

“You got a raise rather recently.”

“And it’s already been eaten up by my expenses.”

“We’ll have to make sure you’re compensated.”

“Much appreciated.”

“For your research expenses.”

“Stingy bastard.”

He went over to the equipment. Kyoya couldn’t suppress a smile. He was an interesting old buzzard.

The “equipment” consisted of an egg-shaped pod. “This is the pod,” said the professor. *Yeah, and?* Kyoya thought. As if reading minds already, the old buzzard launched into a lecture.

“It is not, however, an ordinary pod. It is filled with a saline solution. And it is not a creation of this department, but contains a compound I synthesized to backtrack through time. The user is immersed in the pod naked, and in a flash

returns to the past. It is not a time machine, to be sure, so it cannot take a person thousands of millennia into the past or forward into the future. Only to a past that person has experienced before. Namely, regress them back to the moment of birth, without any significant side effects.”

“Just a sec,” Kyoya interrupted.

The professor frowned. He leaned closer to Kyoya and said, “What’s the matter? Don’t want to get naked?”

“All the same to me. But what exactly are these *insignificant* side effects?”

“Nothing made by man is perfect. I’m not a god.”

“Don’t say it like you’re so proud of it. Anyway, *she’s* the one going in there.”

“Don’t get yourself into such a lather. Fact is, it works just as well with a bathing suit.”

“Quit ducking the question.”

Yamashina stepped in to end the debate. “Time is of the essence. He is the best in his field, which will become apparent soon enough. Forces are conspiring against Sayaka-san even as we speak. Our first priority is discerning their nature. The sooner the better.”

“I agree,” said Sayaka.

Kyoya didn’t voice disapproval and the mad scientist bit his tongue as well.

“Well, then. Gentlemen, let us move to a separate room and leave the young lady to change here.”

They started walking toward the indicated door. Halfway there, Kyoya glanced back over his shoulder. The mad scientist was crouched down in front of the equipment, twiddling with the myriad knobs and switches.

Kyoya grabbed him by the collar of his lab coat. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m checking the equipment.”

“Yeah, right. You’re just randomly pushing buttons. C’mon.”

At the lockers, getting into her bathing suit, Sayaka giggled.

The light of dusk filled the large hall. The world beyond the windows was already dark, filled by twinkling stars and the lights of Demon City.

“Fool.”

Accompanying the quiet curse, a hand reached out from the golden gown and touched a steel epaulet. A dark blue mass silently flew and landed with a thunderous crash on the floor a dozen feet away.

“Idiot.”

The green figure sailed backwards.

“Dunce.”

A red streak flashed through the air.

None of them bounded to his feet. Several hours before, these gladiators had joined the blue knight in a death match with Kyoya Izayoi. None who witnessed it then could have believed their helplessness now, hit so hard they couldn't get up.

“Why did I invite such useless gutter trash into my abode? All to look into that girl's heart and finish off the boy. To fail at one was to fail at both, all due to your blunders. And you let him go, on top of that. What did I reincarnate you for? I should want to kill myself.”

“However—” A painful moan came from Vian, the red knight on the floor. “That young man—possesses talents and powers—that exceed even ours. We would have once asked him to join our band. In such a light—by force of numbers—as the three knights of Marduk, we cannot.”

“Quiet!”

The man in the gown—the masked lord—stomped on the floor. The heavy reverberations raced through the ground, throwing the three six feet into the air and pounding them down onto the floor.

“Don't flatter yourselves! That boy, he is truly a frightening man. I had no desire to let him walk out of here, but could not stop him. Enough. You have your orders. He has returned to Demon City. I will send an assassin appropriate to that place after him.”

“That is—” the red knight groaned.

The other two remained silent.

“Or I will employ *them*. My queen Semiramis, that merciless woman forbade even those brutal barbarians to enter the human world. I will at last set them free.”

“You cannot.”

“I cannot?” The mask’s eyes glowed with a cruel light—a light from deep within that set the slits afire—and made these fearsome knights tremble. “Having come this far, I am no longer capable of comprehending such words. Demon City Shinjuku—a death suited to such a name will consecrate its power unto myself. This will be my answer until you have mitigated my anger.”

The sleeves of the gown shook. For a moment, nothing happened. And then blackness shrouded the heads of the three knights. Something reached down and grabbed hold of the unmoving men. A hand. Enormous fingers made out of reddish-brown stone grew out of the ceiling and plucked them up like matchsticks.

Several minutes later, the golden mask walked down the hallway through the damp gloom. The corridor was made of stone. The air was not particularly humid. And yet the heavy air had a viscous quality, a rotting odor. It was almost as if had one pressed against the stone wall, it would have given way like a swollen flesh, squeezing out putrid pus.

The result of the overwhelming sense of evil filling the place.

He passed through ten stone doors to reach his destination. The soaring rock walls and ceiling defied the ordinary laws of physics, the length and breadth and angles forming at will, descending staircases turning into ceilings, and from there hallways continuing through the air and plunging underground.

Now the masked lord walked along a vertically soaring floor. Light streaming in horizontally from the ceiling poured down on him from above, as if following the pull of gravity.

Here was a labyrinth to eclipse all others. What made it necessary waited for him at its end.

Long ago on the island of Crete, in the ancient Mediterranean kingdom ruled by King Minos, Queen Pasiphae kept her abominable son, the Minotaur, in the catacombs beneath the palace. She refused to cast him out and secured human sacrifices for its sustenance.

The great architect Daedalus was employed to turn the subterranean fortress into a labyrinth that would secure the Minotaur. But surely Daedalus could not have imagined such a fetid maze as this, from which not even the imprisoned air could escape.

At last, a rusty iron door came into view. It was the size and heft of any door that could accommodate a large person. The man in the mask stopped in front of the door. He was not lost in contemplation. He was hesitating.

The hand holding the black key took several seconds reaching toward the lock.

The key wasn't necessary. Before his hand touched the handle, the door opened from the inside. The hinges creaked ominously. The interior of the room was pitch dark.

"You. Have. Come?" The muttered words shook the dank air.

"I have come," the mask answered. "In the name of your Queen, I am releasing you. The purpose for which you were born, make a hell of the earth above."

Two points of blue-green light glowed like fox-fire within the gloom. These were the undeniably gleeful eyes of a person born in the depths of hell.

Part Four: Monsters vs. Magicians

I

The noonday bell rang.

“Box lunch!”

“Home cooked for me.”

Here and there the excited voices rang out as the unsociable teacher of Classics II stomped out of the classroom. For some reason, running around delivering orders, Poteko Toya flashed a V-sign and sidled up to Kyoya.

“What’s up, Izayoi-kun? You don’t look happy.”

“Buzz off,” said Kyoya, averting his eyes from her dumpling-like body, looking instead out the window.

“Aren’t you the rude one.”

“Take off. You’re smothering me.”

“Huh.” Toya frowned, but changed her mind. “Hey, want my lunch?”

“Not hungry. Git.”

“Specially made.”

Toya shook her enormous hips, body-checking the guys out of the adjoining chairs, and plopped herself down with a thump.

Kyoya glanced at her. “Don’t push it.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just get out of my face.”

“I’m not in it, honey.”

Toya waggled her butt again, shoving aside the desks in front and back, and ignoring the grunts of the students gored by the corners of the desks behind and

to the side of her, she took a double-stacked lunch box from under her arm—the size of a shipping crate—and set it on her lap.

“Rest your eyes on these beauties. Glazed sweet potato, sweet potato cheese roll, sweet potato stir-fried in tomato sauce, picked sweet potato in olive oil.”

“There any rice in there?” the startled Kyoya asked. “Your family owns a bar, right? You can’t manage a little rice?”

Poteko’s big sister Junko ran a “bar” for underage kids and students in Mejiro called “Junko’s Jail.” Kyoya earned a little on the side as a bouncer at the place.

“Like hardly. Rice will ruin your figure, don’t you know. Hey, dig in. What do we got here? Ah, mackerel head, bigger the eyes, all the juicier. Sole of calves’ feet simmered in sperm whale bone broth. African vervet monkey testicles. That’ll get the blood flowing in the right direction, if you know what I mean. How about you and me, tonight.”

“I, uh, got places to go and things to do. I’ll leave you to enjoy such epicurean delights by yourself.”

“Oh please, spare me such effusive praise.”

Something in the pair of lunchboxes caught Kyoya’s eye. Pointing at the frightful cuisine he said, “What’s that sparkling powder? Smells like some sort of drug.”

“Vitamins,” she said, pushing out her chest.

“More like *bigamins*,” Kyoya said to himself. He got to his feet. “Live long and prosper.”

At that moment, somebody called out from a desk next to the window, “Hey, there’s some weirdo in the courtyard.”

A sea of uniforms surged across the room. Toya was slow to join them. Lunchboxes in one hand, grabbing the kids in front of her by the backs of their collars and flinging them out of the way with the other, she plowed her way through. This wasn’t a woman anybody wished to mess with once she got underway.

A slender youngster was standing in the center of the schoolyard. His dusky

features had a melancholy aura and suggested a Middle Eastern background. His white shirt, rolled up sleeves and narrow-cut jeans balanced the intellectual mien with a touch of the wild side.

Everybody's first assumption was that he was an exchange student. Everybody except one.

Kyoya raced out of the classroom and down to the courtyard. A PE class had just ended. They surrounded the kid at a distance and eyed him suspiciously. It wasn't that unusual to see students from other schools there. So why was everyone crowding to the window? What were they looking at?

The PE instructor walked up to the kid as Kyoya ran onto the field, still in his slippers. The instructor said something to the kid. The kid turned away. The instructor clapped a hand hard on his shoulder.

The kid only turned his head and looked at the instructor behind him. Nothing else transpired.

The instructor's body turned blue. A wordless scream echoed across the courtyard. The instructor's face and chest glittered with a dull mineral luster. Beneath a bright blue sky, the young PE instructor turned into a stone statue, as if in ironic recognition of some hitherto unknown achievement.

By that time, Kyoya stood in front of the kid, Asura in his right hand. "You here to see me?" he asked in a voice brimming with a tension his classmates had never heard before.

"You understand me?" the kid said, suggesting a smattering command of Japanese.

"He wasn't a threat to you. Put him back the way he was."

"It is too late for that. Can you reanimate the dead?"

"No. I know of only one man who can do that."

"My name is Ishmael. And you are Kyoya Izayoi."

"Yeah."

"I have something to say to you. After school, come to the Koma Theater in Shinjuku."

“Why not settle things here and now?”

“It is all the same to me. Though there is no telling how many more people I might *look* at. Koma is in the ruins. Nobody will interfere.”

“Fine,” Kyoya readily agreed, cognizant of the threat implicit in Ishmael’s words.

“Well, then.” Ishmael nodded. “But having come all this way, I would like to see the differences between you and the teacher for myself.”

He raised his head. Kyoya stood stock still, school uniforms reflected in his black eyes. Ishmael as well remained frozen in place.

“What?” Kyoya asked in an expressionless voice.

Only his lips moved. The rest of his face could have been a Noh mask. This was the result of terrific mental concentration, that preceded the unleashing of his *nenpo*.

“If I’d taken a full hit of your power, I would have turned out like the teacher here. But to do that, it seems I’d have to turn around. Fine with me. Shall we give it our best shots?”

For a moment, the kid’s face twisted into a ghoulish form. A slight smile flashed for a split second. And then the calm countenance once again presented itself.

“I seem to have underestimated you,” he said graciously. “I did not think this world had another Semulia in it. But next time, I will have the sun on my side. There will be no turning your back on me then.”

“Sure.”

Ishmael strolled away. Kyoya didn’t relax until he had passed through the front gate. He was soaked with cold sweat. It was like his *nen* flowed out with his perspiration.

Ishmael hadn’t intended to kill him just now. He’d showed up here more for the fun of it, which was why he’d faced him head on.

Kyoya, though, was dead serious. Had they turned around and faced each other—even feigned doing so—he would have swung Asura at his head.

Ishmael's powers would have left him no other option. He had imparted all of his mental energy into the sword.

This time, the enemy had walked off, showing him only a faint smile. The next time, in the arena of his choosing, the gloves would be off. And Kyoya couldn't be sure he would win.

He sensed the golden mask at work here. And he was making a war of it.

As Kyoya endeavored to focus his thoughts, his mood suddenly changed. With a skeptical glance at the students getting up their courage to approach him, he ran back to the school building. His hand was shaking when he pressed the speed dial button on his cell phone.

He reached someone on the third call. "Kawadacho Philanthropic Hospital."

"Get me Rama in the surgical department. Make it quick!"

"And who are you, sir?"

"Kyoya Izayoi."

"Kyoya-san?" the receptionist said in a friendly voice. Just about anybody living in Shinjuku was familiar with his name. "What are you calling about this time?"

"This time?" Kyoya felt a cold stab of fear down his back.

"We got a call from you a few minutes ago. Rama-san just left to meet you."

II

The call from “Kyoya” came shortly before noon. He said he was in the neighborhood and wanted to see her. He didn’t say why, only that it was a pressing matter. Sayaka set aside her suspicions. After all, being reluctant to come to the hospital was very much like him.

He hadn’t been a particularly happy camper either when he’d visited with Mephisto. And hearing him say he wanted to see her thrilled her more than it awakened any doubts.

The place was a nearby coffee shop.

There were ten or so people in the place when she got there, along with the lingering odor of tobacco smoke and Sheridan Fanu singing “The Hunter of Martin River.” But no Kyoya.

As she stood there, a man with a short mustache — who must’ve been the proprietor—approached her and said that her date would be back in five minutes and asked her to wait here. He showed her to a window seat.

Sayaka furrowed her brows. All the seats were occupied. In front of her were a young couple, a woman in a colorful and ornate scarf and long dress, two salaryman types in suits.

“It’s full.”

The proprietor turned around. “What? Oh, here’s an open seat in the middle.”

Sayaka looked back. The woman was raising a coffee cup to her lips. “There’s somebody there too.”

“Eh?” the proprietor burst out. “Um, are you sure? You’re not nearsighted, are you? Follow me. Right here.”

He walked ahead of her and indicated the place. Sayaka felt a surge of fear. A

woman was sitting right there. And yet the man saw only an empty space.

“This should do, no?” he said stiffly, and walked off.

Sayaka stood there. She couldn't leave. The woman raised her hand. Sayaka pressed the thumb of her right hand against the ball of her middle finger, releasing the safety on her laser ring.

The woman beckoned to her. Against all her natural instincts, as if pulled by an invisible string, Sayaka walked over and sat down across from her.

“Who are you?” said Sayaka.

“You don't know?” the woman asked softly.

For the first time, Sayaka realized that the scarf was covering the woman's mouth. Then how did she drink the coffee? And another thing caught her attention. In the valley between the swell of her breasts, peeking out from the plunging neckline of her dress was a dark red oval like a birthmark.

She saw her reflection in the woman's black eyes. Fighting the sensation of being sucked into them, Sayaka was sure she had seen them somewhere else.

“I have been with you always. Only you haven't realized it. I have been so lonely. My beloved husband awakened first to the possibility, but you continue on unawares. No, you forcibly suppress it. You don't wish to set me free. What tremendous power. Ordinarily, that most detestable of human qualities, that they have been endowed with from the start, could easily be strengthened in other ways. I'm surprised the world has ingénues like you left in it.”

“W-what are you talking about?”

Sayaka could hear the blood coursing through her veins. There was no way she should understand what the woman was talking about—but nevertheless she did. This woman was telling the truth!

She reached out and took hold of Sayaka's right hand. Not a cold, dead hand. A warm and living one.

“A good thing you were unaffected by that memory restoration machine. You lost your memories and everybody claims to have seen nothing. That was to preserve your sanity. As a result, since that time, I have been able to appear like

this, albeit not yet in perfect form.”

The woman tightened the grip of her hand. Sayaka felt her bones creak.

“Stop it!”

“You cannot escape. Because I will return to you.”

“No!” she shouted, jerking her right hand.

Her hand came away so smoothly that she arrested its movement at once, and managed to stop herself just before it collided with the window glass.

Sayaka noticed that she was alone. The customers all around her stared at her with startled expressions. She blushed and looked at the window. “Ah!” she said, and smiled.

Kyoya was standing there. He waved, and walked into the coffee shop. “Sorry. There was something I had to do. All taken care of.”

“No problem.” She smiled again, as if what had just happened hadn’t. “I’m glad you asked me.”

“Yeah?” Kyoya grinned and reached for the coffee cup.

Huh? Sayaka said to herself.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“In that case, all the better. So you didn’t notice?”

“Eh?”

Kyoya raised the coffee cup to his mouth. The rim covered his nose and mouth. For a moment, she could only see his eyes.

Sayaka gulped.

“Wasn’t I drinking coffee?” Kyoya calmly asked.

Sayaka nodded. She’d mistakenly thought that woman had ordered it. She steeled her nerves and betrayed no fear.

“I first drank it at the palace,” Kyoya went on. He took another sip. “Took to it right off. I order it as a matter of course now. Oh, that’s right. My preferred

beverage is Deimos beer, right?”

“Who are you?”

“Come with me and you’ll understand. Don’t worry. Women aren’t my thing.”

“You and that woman just now, are you partners?”

“Ah. Not exactly. You might rather say we hate each other’s guts. Thanks to her, *we* have been imprisoned for ages. Two thousand years, seeing and hearing hardly a thing. A man loses the will to work under those conditions. Hey, what do you say we pretend we’re on a date?”

Sayaka got to her feet. The laser ring on her right hand was fully charged.

“Take it easy.” Kyoya put down the cup and wiped his mouth. “If you don’t want to, you’re free to leave. But if I don’t do the job I came here to do, it’s back in the brig. You can’t run away. Give it up. Come with me to the castle. We’ll have fun.”

“Don’t move!” Sayaka thrust out the ring. Kyoya — his doppelganger — quickly raised his arms. The other customers followed suit. “Let’s take this outside. We don’t want to inconvenience the other people here.”

“Fine with me.”

Kyoya stood up and marched outside in front of her. Sayaka paid the bill. The proprietor stared blankly back at her.

The two set off in the direction of Kawadacho Philanthropic Hospital.

“So where are we going?”

“The police.”

“The palace guard, you mean?”

“More or less.”

His nonchalance gave Sayaka a strange feeling. Aside from that recent look he gave her, she could easily think of him as an otherwise harmless master of disguise. She soon understood just how far this was from the truth.

They hadn’t gone a dozen steps from the coffee shop when five dark shadows surrounded them holding firearms and laser guns.

“Who are you?”

One of the men smiled. “We’re agents with the Information Bureau. Chief Yamashina’s orders.”

“So you’ve been watching the whole time?”

“Twenty-four seven.”

Sayaka lowered her ring.

“Who are they?” Kyoya asked.

“We’re taking you in,” said the agent with the laser gun, in the tone of voice that normally demanded unquestioned obedience.

“Idiot. Guards or jailers? When did hassling people become your job?”

The agent answered the quip by burying the butt of the gun in his stomach. Kyoya grimaced. He scowled at the agent. “I will remember that.”

“This way, Rama-san.” The first man indicated a limousine stopped along the side of the road.

“But he is—”

“Don’t worry about it!” a shrill voice called out.

Sayaka and the men stopped and looked at the car. The voice seemed to be coming from the vehicle.

“Wait here.”

The agent drew the laser gun back out of the holster and ran over to the car. Confirming that there was nobody inside, he circled around the chassis.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” he muttered to himself.

“Oh, quite out of the ordinary,” the car answered.

The startled agent reached out and touched the car. A moment later, his body melted into the body of the car.

Sayaka just stood there, dumbfounded. Then almost on autopilot, aimed her laser ring and pressed the trigger. The air hummed. The car turned into a lump of viscous slime affixed to the road.

Sayaka turned to the remaining agents. Kyoya stood there smacking his lips, Asura resting on his shoulder. The agents were gone.

“I helped myself,” Kyoya said, pulling something white and long from between his lips. “Yeah, guys are definitely more to my liking. You just can’t eat one.”

He spit something out of his mouth. It landed next to Sayaka’s feet. She swallowed the scream rising in her throat.

It was a human rib.

Her fear motivated action. The laser ring hummed again. Kyoya turned into another glob of slime spreading out on the sidewalk.

“Splendid!” the shrill voice said. “I really wanted to go on a date. But I guess that’s out of the question. Too bad. We’ll have to come as we are.”

Sayaka whirled around and directed the beam of light against the rock wall on the right, the source of the voice.

“Waste of effort. Waste of effort.”

The ground beneath her feet chuckled. Sayaka shrieked and sprang away, pressing her skirt between her legs as she ran. The loathsome thought of eyes growing out of the sidewalk and peering up at her propelled her on.

When the hospital came into view, she almost broke down and cried. She flew inside, giving the receptionist in the lobby quite a start. But her face nevertheless was like that of an angel.

The lobby was crowded with people. Gasping for breath, Sayaka sank into a nearby sofa.

“Welcome back,” said the sofa.

A moment later, the lobby was vacant. Sayaka stared at the countless number of slimy blobs on the floor. The walls wavered.

“What’s wrong? Run away.”

Urged on by the voice, Sayaka surrendered to pure instinct and ran out of the hospital. Upon reaching the sidewalk, the building collapsed. The debris struck

the trees along the road and they dissolved too.

Sayaka fled in a blind panic.

“Surprised?” The wind caressed her ears. “Take a right at the next corner. An even bigger surprise awaits.”

She recognized the street. She tried going straight, but her feet insisted on turning right, according to the command.

The hospital was standing there.

“Understand?” the voice boasted. “This isn’t the neighborhood you know, but one of my duplicates. The same way I did so long ago, making a meal of the people and animals who wandered in unawares. Syria, Palestine—they were all verdant fields once. Until I consumed them.”

Sayaka could think of nothing to say in reply.

“I bring you along nicely, and this city aside, the rest of the country was promised me. It has been so long since I’ve enjoyed a truly filling meal. Let’s go, then.”

“I’m afraid not,” said a familiar voice.

A man dressed in black stood nonchalantly at the gate of the pretend hospital. In the face of his beauty, even the sunlight seemed to dim a little.

“Doctor Mephisto!”

The hems of his black cape fluttered eerily, as if in response to Sayaka’s exclamation.

“What a surprise.” The voice swirled around him. “These surroundings are sealed and yet this human being just shows up. How did you get in?”

“Doctor,” Sayaka cried out. “What are you doing here?”

“I got a phone call from Izayoi-kun, along with his lost shadow, and followed it. As for being able to enter this place, being Doctor Mephisto is reason enough.”

“I do not care for what you say.” The voice brimmed with emotion. “But I’ve taken a liking to your type. Long ago, nothing made for a more delicious repast

than priests and sorcerers.”

“Ogdora,” Mephisto said, almost as an afterthought.

“You know me?”

The wind howled and then stopped. Even Sayaka could sense the inescapable chain of murderous intent strung between the two.

“During our phone call, I asked Izayoi-kun about your accomplices. Curing someone like you is outside my field of experience, but I am aware of the treatment.”

Mephisto’s right hand reached out from the folds of his cape. Resting on the white palm was a small brown bottle. The cap was off. “I synthesized it in a hurry, so it might not prove as effective as advertised. The Magician Phlora’s miracle drug.”

A thunderous roar shook the air. The ground beneath Mephisto’s feet caved in. The same fate as the agent who’d touched the car awaited him. But he wasn’t swept in. He stood in the air. He hadn’t been standing on firm ground all along.

For this was Doctor Mephisto — the Demon Physician.

“You shouldn’t be surprised. Sorcerers were adept at levitation in your time. Supposedly it was even used as a salutation. I’ve read your hand well. What is your next move?”

“This!”

The buildings all around them tumbled down and avalanched toward Mephisto. Still in midair, the avalanche turned into a blob of slime. Mephisto drew an arc with his right hand. The spray of purple liquid didn’t rain to the ground. Rather, it clung to an empty space. With a shout, it gave rise to a strange phenomenon.

The peculiar sight emerged inside the dripping air.

This “neighborhood” created by Ogdora must be an illusion projected on his incorporeal body. Phlora’s drug scalded and dissolved it.

The earth warped. The sky crumbled. In a flash, that liquefied *other* world began to corrode. Sayaka was suddenly standing on a completely different—and

yet quite familiar—street.

The huge magical manor soared above her head. Adjacent to the Park Hyatt Hotel was the DMZ and Shinjuku's Chuo Park. To the left was Twelfth Street and the old capital city center.

A dozen feet ahead, a wry smile rose to Mephisto's face.

“Doctor!”

Sayaka ran up to him. The placid mask of his almost wax-like face softened a bit. He asked, “Are you all right?”

She nodded.

“Then let's go.”

“Yes, let's.”

The two set off together.

“Wait!”

A woman's voice stopped them in their tracks.

III

Two o'clock in the afternoon.

Kyoya walked up to Shinjuku's Koma Theater. Thanks to a strange miracle or the magical whimsies of the Devil Quake, the entire structure was riven with cracks and fissures but stood as it always had, still in possession of its original grandeur.

In an effort to memorialize the scars of the Devil Quake, along with the other standing buildings in the safety zone, the theater was named a historical site and placed under the protection of the Shinjuku Ward government. Two guards were usually posted there.

School wasn't quite out, but concerned about Sayaka, Kyoya couldn't stand around doing nothing. He straightaway asked Mephisto for help and lent him the use of his "lost shadow." He hadn't heard anything since.

He raced over to Mephisto Hospital, but they couldn't tell him anything either. His only recourse was to grab Ishmael and get him to cough up the details.

The guards weren't there.

He had to think they'd met a bad end, else that monster wouldn't have picked this place to start with. "He's a dead man," Kyoya growled to himself. He pushed through the center door and strode into the lobby.

The theater had a capacity of twenty-three hundred. Now it was filled with the stench of decay that no bureaucrat could expunge. Only the smell filled the space. Nobody was there.

"Hey, anybody home?" Kyoya shut the door and called out.

If he was off somewhere else goofing around waiting for school to let out, all the more reason to knock his block off. But then a figure emerged from behind

the curtains, erasing that particular concern.

“Thanks for coming,” Ishmael said with an innocent smile.

“What did you do with Sayaka Rama-san?”

“Ah, those two are at my master’s abode.” He raised his head at a point in space.

“You mean she’s with Mephisto?”

“That’s right. The doctor killed my accomplice and took her there.”

“What?” Kyoya exclaimed.

He’d always had his suspicions about the doctor, but visiting the enemy in his lair? He should’ve known better than to trust that pretty boy.

“Do you know who she really is? Yes, the queen. The same who imprisoned me and mine inside that maze. The mask intends to turn her into his perfect queen. In other words, seeing her, the secrets of reincarnation come to light. The doctor appears taken by the possibilities as well. Draw out Semiramis within while leaving the girl unscathed—he would count such a result a success.”

“The bastard.” Kyoya strengthened his grip on Asura. “Resurrecting his old wife? No objections to that, I suppose. But is that all? Why build that freaking big mansion? Why come all the way to Japan and scare the crap out of everybody?”

“It is a mystery to me too. All I want to do is eat you.” Ishmael was already drooling.

“Weirdo. If you turn me into a rock, how are you gonna eat me?”

“Nothing tastier than a rock.”

Kyoya didn’t answer. He walked down the aisle and jumped onto the stage. He raised Asura from the *en garde* position to the height of Ishmael’s eyes.

“You’re taking this awful easy,” he challenged him. “Just to get this straight. You’re facing me. Look the other way and I’ll wait until you turn back.”

“Understood. No problem.”

Ishmael grinned. He slowly turned his head in the other direction and backed

up to Kyoya. He reached up and parted the hair on the back of his head, revealing a set of closed eyes, a nose and a mouth. The kid had another face on the back of his head.

“This is the real one. I’ve already turned around. When I open my eyes, it’s curtains. Or are you faster on the draw? Let’s see.”

He opened his eyes. Wide with surprise. The tip of the sword almost filled his vision, obscuring Kyoya at the other end of it.

“Son of a bitch!” Ishmael cried out.

He jumped backwards as the black comet streaked at his brow, dodging it at the last second. Blood burst from his face, from his broken nose.

“Shit!” Kyoya rejoined. He’d missed the target. There were no second chances in this game.

Ishmael’s eyes flared with rage. Kyoya assumed a martial arts stance, ready to finish the job with his hands. In a flash, he turned to stone.

“You’re not without skill.” Ishmael wiped the blood from his nose and stared back at him. “Besides Semiramis, only the young traveler named Semulia ever drew blood from me. Come to think of it, that swordsmanship does look familiar. Whatever. All the sooner to chow down.”

The kid opened his mouth. His lower jaw dropped, opening his mouth all the way to his ears. Baring his yellow teeth, he started at the top and began chewing through the stone statue of Kyoya.

With an awful crunching that should have never otherwise been associated with “food,” he tore off Kyoya’s head down to its neck. Gnawing away like a rock drill, he suddenly spit out the contents onto the floor. Kyoya’s head had turned to round stones and dust.

“No!” Ishmael screamed, showing his teeth. “No! You don’t taste like this!”

“I don’t suppose I do. And I don’t miss either.”

The voice came from behind Ishmael. The real thing now faced him. But Ishmael saw nothing.

“Bring it on.”

This time, the voice came from above him. He glanced up, but too late. Asura swung down from the ceiling and smashed against the side of his head. Simultaneously a great burst of psychic energy poured down on the monster's head.

This rare creature sank silently to his knees. Kyoya had been hiding in the chandelier.

"Hey, no hard feelings, eh. Not my true strength. Seems that Doctor Mephisto knows your name. He clued me into your special skills, and lent me a copy for my own use." He spoke almost in a sad aside. "In any case, I've got to get hold of that fickle bastard."

Kyoya left at once for Azabu and told Chief Yamashina that he needed to get in touch with Mephisto inside the Babylon Palace. The answer Yamashina got back from Babylon Palace was that Mephisto wasn't there. "But you're welcome to come see for yourself."

"Playing dumb, I see. Him and his pissant mask."

"What do you plan on doing?"

"That's what I plan on asking *him*. What the hell kind of game is he up to, waking up here after his two-thousand-year-old dream?"

"That is a question we would like an answer to as well."

"Where did he build that palace in the first place?"

"That we have figured out. Last night, a gigantic construction facility was discovered in an ancient Babylonian archaeological site. Drawings inscribed there accurately describe the floating city. In other words, it was constructed twenty-five hundred years ago and sealed away in another dimension. They figured out how to warp space too. Obviously the level of prehistoric technology often exceeded ours. The physicists are showing as much interest in those ruins as the archaeologists."

"Good work."

"I agree."

"Has the president been contacted?"

“No, but I’m sure he’s being kept in the loop.”

“You guys are really pulling out all the stops.”

“What are you doing to do?”

“About our guest?”

“We’d dearly like to arrest him, but he’s duly registered as a citizen. We can’t haul him in without a good reason.”

“You’ll have to do what you have to do. Me, I’m on my way to the Himalayas.”

“Where?” exclaimed the chief, his eyes bugging out.

“My powers right now aren’t nearly enough to take out the likes of him. I gotta take it up another notch. And there’s no better place to practice than the holy mountain where, back in the day, my father learned *nenpo*. A bit Spartan, I know, but I’ll give it a month and see how it goes. Mephisto should be able to keep an eye on Sayaka for that long. Well, see you around.”

Part Five: Prisoner in Babylon

I

Sayaka couldn't shake her sense of unease.

She was in what might be called a huge living room inside Babylon Palace. Sweet scents caressed her nose. The currents of air carried with them the hint of jasmine.

Three days had passed since she'd entered this castle in the sky. According to the old legends, these were the Floating Gardens of Babylon. Except that the gardens were *inside* the palace, and did not comprise the structure itself.

The ziggurat-shaped structure formed from the many terraces was said to sit on a square foundation twelve-hundred feet to a side and fifty feet high.

The basic building material was stone. First, reeds were laid over the stones, and with not a crack showing, covered with natural asphalt. Then came two courses of bricks, the spaces filled with plaster and carefully overlaid with sheets of lead. This became the foundation.

Each terrace was piled with generous amounts of earth and every species of plant and flower known to sixth century B.C. The glittering array of colors created the illusion of a truly floating world.

The meticulous work revealed in the construction of the foundation could be rightly praised for its ruggedness, but its primary task was making it watertight so that the plants and flowers could be bathed with water.

Enormous amounts of water were scooped up from the Euphrates and stored in huge tanks at the top of the terraces. The lower levels were supplied through pipes. Automatic sprinklers kept the gardens continually and uniformly watered.

Some archaeologists theorized that hundreds of slaves turned a water wheel that deposited water from the river in the tanks using leather buckets. Others held that screw-driven pumps did the job. In any case, no evidence remained to

support either claim.

The gardens rose to a height of three hundred and fifty feet. Taking into account the technology of the time, it was hard to imagine how they managed to pump water that high.

According to calculations by one architect, the garden must have weighed in the vicinity of seven million tons, besting the six-point-eight million of the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Surely the kind of project that could only have been undertaken by an ancient despot. Not to mention it was built for the enjoyment of a single woman—

Sayaka interrupted the stream of information implanted by the auto-suggestion machines in the Japan section of the World Federation Government Information Bureau, sat back on the sofa, and looked at Doctor Mephisto.

She felt a burning sensation in her chest. That was how comely the man was.

The silky long hair, the black garb, the golden embroidery and pendant glittering against his chest—accessories that would look gaudy and pretentious and downright strange on any other man—only served in this case to magnify the young doctor's beauty.

Sayaka had made it a rule to never judge a man by his outward appearance, and yet she couldn't help herself here. Ten out of ten women would have the same reaction.

Then there was the case of the famous Hollywood actress who betrayed her lover and was in turn infected by a demon that manifested itself in the form of spreading tumors with sentient, speaking faces. When Mephisto operated on her, even those cancerous countenances gaped at him in wonder.

After she was cured, the woman despaired of returning to Hollywood, appealed to the Foreign Ministry without success, and was finally confined to her bed with hysteria. Long story short, she had been bewitched by Doctor Mephisto as well.

Sayaka didn't realize it herself, but within the fever gripping her thoughts, an eerie essence she was quite unfamiliar with coolly entwined its brilliant threads about her. This was that unapproachable secret that set women's hearts on fire,

that kept them at arm's length while drawing them like moths to the flame to the handsome doctor.

Since coming to work in Shinjuku, Sayaka had heard rumors aplenty about Doctor Mephisto. They had met on several occasions since the previous incident. He was not a *bad* man—in the conventional meaning of being driven by or to evil ends.

Which was why patients at death's door sought him out day and night.

However, the conventional meaning of *good* could definitely not be attached to him either. Loan sharks who showed up at the hospital to extract their pound of flesh from his patients were summarily ejected. If it didn't end there, they'd be dragged down to the autopsy room and cut to pieces to provide the parts to heal the proper patients.

Needless to say, such terrors had a profoundly deterrent effect. At the same time, considering the rapacious thugs such “treatments” were reserved for, it was hard not to smile and be grateful.

Mephisto was the one who had brought her to this palace. In the evening three days before, having vanquished the monster Ogdora, a woman's voice had called out behind them.

When they'd turned around, standing there was the beautiful woman who'd sent a chill through Sayaka's heart in the coffee shop near Kawadacho Philanthropic Hospital.

“What do you want?” Mephisto asked.

“The magician who destroyed even Ogdora—would he wish to try his hand at unraveling one of the spirit world's great mysteries?”

“What would that be?” Mephisto asked, taking up a protective stance next to Sayaka.

The woman then made the startling declaration that she was Semiramis. The conversation lasted no more than a minute, and concluded with her stating, “If *that* is your desire, then on to the palace.”

All the more surprising was Mephisto's reaction. “Well, how about it?” he

said. “True, caution might seem the better part of valor here. Logic dictates that the lamb escaping the jaws of the wolf should not seek shelter in the lion’s den. Say the word and I shall gladly escort you home. Should we end up in the lair of a demon god, not only shall I, Doctor Mephisto, be there with you, but I swear that not one finger shall bruise your fair skin. And should the time come, I will take you to safe ground. Moreover, the way I see it, as with Demon City the fate of this palace is aligned with cosmic forces. You hold the key to unlocking it. What do you say? Shall we enjoy a relaxing stroll around?”

His low measured voice, like a lullaby, left her betwixt and between. The lack of compulsion in and of itself was compelling. And they’d hardly be taking a *relaxing stroll* around the palace’s mysterious precincts.

And yet, Sayaka’s heart said *yes*. She’d hardly hesitated a moment. Hidden within the apparent irresponsibility of Mephisto’s proposition was a fount of scientific intrigue that anyone other than her would probably have missed. She was beginning to grasp as well that he had correctly identified her as the key to the whole affair.

The only solution was to go. Whatever was waiting for her—whatever awful fate awaited her there—she would put a stop to the weirdness. With Doctor Mephisto along with her, what could go wrong?

Besides—the face of the jaunty young man rose up in her thoughts like a spring light — Kyoya would definitely come for her.

And so with Semiramis leading the way, the two of them ascended to the floating castle that was Demon Palace Babylon.

Three days had passed since.

In terms of hospitality, they lacked for nothing. Semiramis disappeared at some point. Android maids and an android butler had escorted them to their rooms and waited upon them hand and foot.

The lord of the manor was occupied with a pressing matter and wouldn’t be free for three days. Once the opportunity presented itself, he would explicate the mysteries that concerned them. In the meantime, they were to wait here and enjoy themselves to the fullest.

So Sayaka and Mephisto set off to explore the great palace. After three days, they had a very good idea of its construction.

With the exception of the critical power and control rooms and the lord's personal suite, the android butler promised that they could go wherever their feet might take them. The android proved good to its word.

The end result was that they understood that while this floating castle did not, from outward appearances, measure up to the immensity of the grand palaces of old, it really did integrate warped space into its construction on a scale that exceeded any in existence.

What the contemporary state of spatial physics and geometry had only begun to hesitatingly prototype, Babylon Palace had put to practical use in amazing ways, such as extending straight lines and expanding three dimensional space almost indefinitely.

In concrete terms, a cube of a specific volume could, disregarding the finite dimensions of its walls, contain an infinite amount of space.

The wondrous utopias that wizards in ancient China purportedly created in small flasks—filled with seas and mountains and tens of thousands of people leading splendiferous lives—these “universes in a bottle” had now been turned into fact through the miracle of science.

Even with all of the powers of the mysterious manor lord, there must be limits to how far he could warp space. The endless halls had an end, after all. The size of Babylon Palace itself spoke to the limits of technology.

On one occasion during her strolls about the palace, Sayaka experienced a physical manifestation of these spatial manipulations.

Attempting to turn down a certain hallway, a large hand the size of three men blocked the way. The fingers were as big as herself. At a glance, they appeared to be stone. Except that they bent as if human.

Sayaka jumped back in surprise. The concourse she was walking down was wide enough to accommodate three trucks driving abreast. The passageway from which the hand emerged could have barely handled two people. There was no way the owner of the hand could fit in such a space. Assuming correct

proportions, the rest of him should be at least twenty-five feet tall.

The hand did nothing else, so Sayaka assumed it was simply a device to indicate the end of the line. So she turned around, and had gone down several more corridors when she suddenly found herself in a hallway with a fairly low ceiling, no more than ten feet high.

A foot abruptly descended in front of her. She understood at once that it was a partner to the hand. She looked up. A leg, from knee to thigh, protruded from the ceiling, showing roughly the same muscular definition as the human equivalent.

No gap appeared where it intersected with the ceiling. The dimension that housed the big foot and this section of the ceiling must bend into a fourth dimension that connected them.

She had no choice but to retreat again and go down a different hallway. When a part of the big body didn't appear, she began to suspect she was being toyed with.

"Doctor Mephisto!" Sayaka called out.

The beautiful countenance, eyes closed, turned to her like a zephyr. She sensed a mystical aroma wafting through the air, but it must be only her imagination.

"It's been three days. The masked lord is supposed to show up today."

Mephisto said bluntly, "It depends on him."

"But spending all this time doing nothing—"

"It has been quite the thrilling adventure."

"Huh?"

"Wherever we go, we are being closely watched. Living eyes, electronic eyes—I haven't had the time to settle down and rest."

Sayaka had to wonder when this man ever settled down and slept. That was when she saw a reflection in the corner of his eyes. From the corridor leading to the living room, a man in a long robe elegantly made his entrance.

The mask.

“Speak of the devil,” Doctor Mephisto said.

Having appeared at long last, the mask bowed reverentially. “Welcome to my humble abode. I was the one who invited you, so please forgive my long absence.”

“Think nothing of it,” Mephisto answered with a smile. “You’ve kept the promise made when we arrived and this is reward enough.”

“Naturally.” The mask nodded. “The preparations took three days. I presumed the famous Doctor Mephisto would be satisfied with the arrangements. Please. This way.”

In the direction of his outstretched hand, a door opened that hadn’t been there a moment before. The mask led the way. No sooner had they all passed through the door but the floor dropped out from beneath them.

Sayaka managed to stifle a scream, first because the descent was measured, and also because as soon as it began, Doctor Mephisto steadied her shoulders. The touch of his hands through her blouse was cool and firm.

“Free fall transport. But rather than a gravitational field, the application of spatial dynamics. Impressive technology.”

The words communicated admiration but his tone of voice was cool and aloof.

After descending for a hundred and fifty feet, the three of them came to a stop. A stone-lined corridor reached out before their eyes. Though not as richly adorned as above, the limestone exhibited an exceptional craftsmanship, surrounding them with an understated elegance.

This area was distinctly different from the upper levels, which were clearly designed to impress the guests. Rather, it had about it the grave formality of a ceremonial altar.

As if propelled along by a slight breeze, they came to stand before a great bronze door. The mask reached out with his right arm. It opened silently, without so much as a creak.

The expansive interior met their eyes along with a draft of chill air. There seemed no end to the space. The huge columns vanished into the distance. Here and there among the columns could be glimpsed a ring of evenly spaced candlesticks, casting off a wavering blue light.

Surrounded by the eerie flickering flames was a depression in the floor, bowl-shaped like an earthenware mortar. Water filled it to the brim.

The mask said in a muffled voice, “Step closer. See for yourselves.”

“Doctor?” Sayaka looked up at Mephisto.

“Let’s take a look,” he said.

They walked forward. The water was crystal clear. Something floated there at the bottom of the pool. Sayaka exclaimed, “It’s that woman from before!”

“Yes,” came the mask’s voice from behind them, and sounding very far away. “That is Semiramis, my wife.”

II

“I am familiar with the name of Semiramis,” Doctor Mephisto said, in a voice as solemn and ethereal as the mood of this temple. He could have pronounced himself her husband in the same breath, and no one would have thought it strange.

“However, that is the name of the storied queen of the Babylonian king, she who ruled all of Assyria. For her he built the Hanging Gardens many millennia ago. Ah, and so now the ancient legend appears before us.”

The mask nodded. “It is as you say. Semiramis was that legendary queen, and was my wife. Her body is entombed in the waters of her beloved Euphrates. Even now she slumbers there unblemished.”

“I had heard of an enormous structure constructed in an oasis alongside the Euphrates. It drew water from the river and purified it in order to preserve the cells of a human body from decay. Here are the last vestiges of that water, I suppose.”

“You suppose correctly. Buried beneath two thousand years of sandstorms, even the stone foundations are nowhere to be seen. It is now stored beneath this palace. Here is all the water left in the pool.”

Mephisto looked quietly at the man in the golden mask. “Only one man would call Semiramis his wife and Babylon Palace his home. You are that famous suzerain?”

“I am.” The monarchical mask answered with a dignified bow. “I am Nebuchadnezzar II.”

Sayaka was astounded. This was Nebuchadnezzar II, who twenty-five hundred years ago ruled the Middle Eastern kingdom of Babylonia. That fantastical personage was standing right before her.

“Semiramis reigned over ancient Assyria, which should have been Babylonia’s sworn enemy. That being the case, asserting that the Hanging Gardens were built to assuage the ennui of a princess from a mountain kingdom was a fiction.”

“Worthless sentimentalism,” the mask answered Mephisto. “The queen of the abundant kingdom of Assyria would wish for nothing of the sort. A woman raised in the mountains comes to live in the deserts of Babylon; seeing her pining for the hills and rivers of her birth, the kind-hearted Nebuchadnezzar plants a giant garden in a corner of the capital brimming with water and greenery. Ha! Do you think in a world full of heroes, warriors and champions, where kingdoms were brought down and built up in the blink of an eye, that such nonsense would be tolerated for a moment? Nobody knows, then or now, why this great garden was built.”

“Hoh. Then instruct us.” Mephisto’s eyes brimmed with a fierce light, unusual in its intensity even for him.

However, the answer would not be forthcoming.

“All is as Semiramis wished. Her desires then, her dreams now—best to hear them from *her* mouth.”

He turned to her. Sayaka felt like he’d dropped a cold ball of ice down the back of her collar. The green glow of the electronic lens, infused with a loathing that death could not extinguish, was like the fires of hell.

“The body of Semiramis lies there, but her soul resides in another woman, inside the girl called Sayaka Rama. The cunning of that damned Doctor Faustus, to seal up the queen of hell inside such a heavenly beauty.”

“Hoh,” said Doctor Mephisto. The name of this new doctor had obviously touched a chord, in an altogether intriguing manner. He was enjoying this strange and perilous situation all the more. For he was the Demon Physician. “Sayaka-chan,” he said.

“Yes,” Sayaka said hopefully.

“You said this man showed you a dream. Does it live on in your memories?”

Sayaka blanched and nodded. The terrifying memories had not expunged her courage and resolve.

And to such a woman, the beautiful physician dared to say, “Would you object to reliving them?”

Sayaka’s eyes went wide in silent surprise. She could feel the mask’s consternation as well.

“The restoration of ancient times requires a certain kind of elixir. Formulating it with this medical technology is not easy, and the amount necessary to produce a useful outcome has yet to be confirmed for her.”

“It does exist in *my* hospital.” Doctor Mephisto’s words seemed to encase this grand temple in ice.

“What are you saying?”

“I completed it before setting out, in order to dispose of the monster known as Ogdora. Well, well. Shall we return not only to the rise and fall of ancient Babylon, but to the moment of her lunar birth as well?”

Flinging back the cape, his white hand produced a small vial. What struck Sayaka more than that though, was the smile that creased the lips of the Demon Physician. The evil smile that captivated a scholar of the Middle Ages must have appeared no different than now.

The handsome man of great learning who brought the gospel of life to so many in that enchanted city—and on this endless and eerie sacred ground, the mysterious doctor commanding that memories of terror and horror return to this sinless girl. Was Doctor Mephisto a child of god or servant of the devil?

He thrust the vial out in front of Sayaka. “Will you partake?”

His voice was as cool and soft and terrifying as ever. Sayaka took the vial of dark green liquid. She wasn’t responding unmindfully to Mephisto’s desires. She understood that they had to get to the heart of the matter here and now.

After the memory restoration treatment at the World Federation Government Information Bureau, Chief Yamashina had told her that the procedure failed. When she asked, Kyoya said the same thing.

It was a lie. Chief Yamashina and Kyoya couldn’t fool her. She was beset by the worry that what she couldn’t tell herself had been rekindled inside of her.

That must have been why Chief Yamashina dispatched the bodyguards.

Along with what the woman in the coffee shop said—*I have been with you always*—what did that mean? An infinite state of unease reached out to her from a bottomless pit and wrapped around her like a spider's web. She wished to sweep it all into the clean light of day, and so agreed to take the drug.

“Doctor,” she said firmly.

“Yes?” Mephisto said, leaning forward slightly. This was the Mephisto the patients in his hospital knew. The calm smiling countenance that even those suffering from the most severe of mental disorders would, very much despite themselves, react to with their own expressions of calm and relief.

Those same reassuring currents filled her own heart. “Um, nothing.” She shook her head. She wanted to ask whether he knew about the relationship between her and that woman, or if he was just keeping quiet about it.

But it didn't much matter at this point. To this doctor, human doubt and worry was a world away.

Sayaka opened the lid of the vial and drank down its contents.

At the same time, Chief Dai Yamashina of the World Federation Government Information Bureau, Japan section, received—with a raised eyebrow—an unannounced, undisclosed visit from the mayor of Shinjuku and the assistant energy comptroller.

They met in a conference room reserved for such occasions. On the table between them was a holographic display of the materials the visitors from Shinjuku had brought with them.

“I am familiar with the data,” said the Section Chief, hiding his qualms with a smile. “What shall we do about it?”

“Let's not play dumb,” the mayor said impatiently, thumping a big fist on the table, making the holographic waver.

The assistant comptroller jumped to his feet. “You may only be a chief in the World Federation Government Information Bureau, but you have been nominated for the top post in the past. There's no way you wouldn't know what

this data means at a glance!”

“Well, then,” the Section Chief said, in a deeply troubled manner, his graceful features darkening.

“In any number of ways, the ordinary rules of government in the neighboring wards don’t apply in Shinjuku. Illegal espers, cyborgs, assassins, spies from every corner of the world make their nests here. Fine. Let’s get down to business. Over these last five days, active energy levels have soared five times. Five times the normal amount of energy is spilling onto the streets of Demon City, of Shinjuku. Even a child would understand the implications!”

“I don’t know. Abilities vary so widely when it comes to children,” said the Section Chief, intent on playing the straight man to the end.

The mayor was mad enough to spit. He was going out on a limb with such an important official in the World Federation government. But there was no way anyone could carry off the duties of Demon City mayor without a few pints of piss and vinegar flowing through his veins.

The kind of people who showed up at city hall weren’t just law-abiding citizens, but gangsters looking to launder their ill-gotten gains, drifters and grifters and cyborgs with fake green cards demanding the rights of legitimate residents, and so on and so on.

Turn them away politely, the usual threats and blusters, and if push came to shove, using all means necessary, up to and including overwhelming force—these were the mayor’s minimal conditions.

The first mayor had thrown down with three killer robots hired by an organized crime family, got badly hurt in the exchange, and resigned. When the first lady of a particular world power opined in an unguarded moment that Demon City was a blot on the natural beauty of Japan, his replacement knocked her flat, in the process felling the president and his press secretary like tenpins. He was out too.

The third and current mayor was rumored to swear blood oaths with his city managers while puffing on a cigar in an underground bunker surrounded by high explosives. At least that was the reputation he’d fostered. In the end, the prime minister gave his predecessor a covert pat on the back and rewarded him

with a hefty ministerial portfolio.

“Do you understand what we’re talking about? These numbers don’t refer to the energy output of the local industry—the large-scale greenhouses, the synthetic food processors, the illegal arms manufacturers and the rest. The energy generated by human activity, all the inertia arising out of mass transit, the states of organic and inorganic matter, the sum total of energies emanated in all forms living and dead—the energy balance of Shinjuku *in toto*. That has risen five fold. Five hundred percent. What in the world could account for this expansion?”

“Um—?” The assistant comptroller poked his cucumber-like face into the mayor’s tirade. “Though the total energy output has increased, the sources and composition of the life energies, inertial energies and projected latent energies haven’t changed. It’s as if an energy radiating device suddenly appeared in Shinjuku five days ago.”

“I could live with that.” The mayor frowned and took a cigar from his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. “Hey, a light. Forget the editorializing just now. Only my assistant’s opinion. Not officially shared by the ward government. Our theory is, it’s a catalytic phenomenon, not some other energy source that sprang into being. Demon City itself is exacerbating the increase, catalyzing it and sending it sky high at a whack.”

“But even in the case of Demon City, whatever the nature of this energy, the sources you mentioned don’t exceed the sum total. If the separate energy increases zero out, it’s not physically possible for the totals to increase, no matter what the catalyst.”

“It’s right here in the figures,” the mayor said with a triumphant expression.

“But then where do you imagine this impossible five-fold increase came from?”

Section Chief Yamashina looked into the mayor’s eyes. The mayor’s face twitched. He knew the man wasn’t posing the question as a simple formality. The assistant comptroller gulped down his tea and yelped upon scalding his lip.

“We—” the mayor started to say, when a warning buzzer of some sort interrupted him.

“What is it?” Yamashina asked, turning to an invisible microphone.

What looked like an underling wearing sunglasses appeared in the holograph on the table. “We just received an emergency communication from the Shinjuku Disaster Management Center. Their sensors forecast an earthquake directly beneath us that matches the one that destroyed Shinjuku.”

III

Sayaka knew she was really two. The eyes perceiving the scene reaching out before her were her own—and also those of another woman.

Semiramis. The evil queen who once ruled ancient Assyria. As had so many of the rich and powerful before her, she bound the authority of the secular and sacred into a single weapon of uncompromising might, claiming each new bounty with a fresh tide of holy blood.

What Sayaka was looking at was the miserable state of those sacrificial victims.

This was the city of Babylon.

No building was safe. Even the brick houses were consumed in fire. Those that weren't coughed up black smoke, charred human skeletons clinging to the skeletal remains of the consumed buildings.

The streets ran red, turning into rusty splotches where falling bricks covered up the blood. The dead were young and old, men and women alike. All of them were missing their heads and hands and feet, and many had their bellies ripped open.

Sayaka felt like throwing up, while her other self was drunk with joy. They both knew that this was their doing.

The scene changed. Sayaka was standing on a large stone platform. In front of and behind, to her right and left, was a solid phalanx of Assyrian soldiers holding spears all pointing at a great line of people some distance away from them.

Prisoners of war. Their arms and legs were bound to shackles and balls and chains, their faces clouded with presentiments of their impending fate. Sayaka raised the staff in her right hand.

No, she cried out. *This isn't right!*

But another voice commanded, *Do it! They are heretics, fools who raised a sword against my god. The least they can do is atone for their sins by spilling their blood upon this altar.*

Stop!

Kill them!

The staff came down.

Three knights appeared among the prisoners. One held a long lance. One had unusually long arms and an equally long sword. The third had six arms. The three horses kicked up a curtain of sand and dust as the three knights attacked the defenseless wave of humanity.

Every flash of the lance speared three or four, flinging them groaning through the air. The sweep of the sword beheaded women and children, cleaved skulls in two, and stained the sky with blood.

Some tried to flee. Despite the iron balls and shackles and chains, the fear of death propelled them forward foot by foot. Several hours later, by then thousands of feet from the place of the slaughter, they may have even felt a sense of relief. And then came steel arrows flying from so far away, and yet piercing their chests like paper.

One arrow shot through ten at a time. After five arrows, the slaughter was over. The remaining people scattered in a different direction—guarded by no one—in the direction of a cliff.

The cliff moved. What looked like the boulder holding up the precipice trudged forward. It was a stone giant in the shape of a man. The boulders on its back were damming up something else as well.

Water. A huge quantity of water was stored inside the cliff.

The prisoners couldn't remove the balls and chains from their ankles and wrists. They could do nothing but stand there as the raging waves swept over them. The defenseless victims sank to the bottom and drowned in the mud. In less than ten minutes, the wastelands had turned into a marsh.

High in the sky, the sun beat mercilessly down on the desert. But here and there amidst the carnage of the execution site, miraculously, could still be found struggling signs of human life.

The stone giant bearing up the cliff stomped with its thousand-ton feet, snuffing out what remained of them.

Stop! Stop! Stop! Sayaka cried out.

Kill! Kill! Kill them! That other woman howled with laughter.

Both were Sayaka, both were *her*.

The atrocities continued. The stone giant destroyed the Chaldean city of Sarrabani by itself. It approached the strongly fortified battlements bearing a polished bronze shield that reflected the sun's rays. It became a gigantic mirror amplifying the sunlight a thousand fold, burning down the city walls. Everyone within the walls was burned to ashes.

Sayaka's tears and despair spilled across the endless desert. *Her* laughter echoed across the moonlit oases. *This is what I commanded.* Disgust and white-hot anger engulfed her. *That woman is me,* the both of them said.

You are not going to kill me. Neither will I let you die. I am the one who will wipe you out of existence. When that time comes, I will be free as the wind. For twenty-five hundred years that damned Doctor Faustus has tormented me.

The scenes of carnage continued. Wherever Sayaka went, only celebrations of war and death and destruction greeted her, the God of Death presiding over the rites.

Sayaka sorrowed, and *she* was delirious with joy. And there she was, slathering her beautiful body with their blood, submerging herself in pools of blood while indulging herself with her many male slaves.

Setting her apart from the other contending tyrants of the time, her youth and beauty showed no sign of receding. The queen's battles parading before Sayaka's eyes went on for decades. And yet her white skin lost none of its luster, not a wrinkle marred its surface.

Or rather, standing in the midst of battle, pierced by swords and arrows of the

enemy, when the contest was concluded not a scar remained. As she perched at the edge of hatred and anger and sadness, Sayaka's curiosity was directed toward that puzzle.

One phenomenon came the closest to an explanation.

The day of the massacre, but only after all of the lives were extinguished, the queen strolled off on her own. Nobody accompanied her. Her glowing body covered by a gauzy veil, she walked the battlefield—that was now piled with corpses and running with rivers of blood.

The dead had begun to reek, and the vultures began to eat. Here and there amongst the heaps of bodies—the torsos missing heads and hands, the lifeless sockets in the severed heads filled with infinite loathing—shone the eyes of wolves.

Here in this hell on earth, where the smell of death was the strongest and the dead were the greatest in number, the queen casually appeared and exposed her naked, voluptuous flesh.

As she stood there like a statue in this “valley of death,” as the Psalmist so aptly described it, an even stranger sight appeared. Before the odor could cling to her ample breasts and slender waist and firm thighs, a white mist roiled up, cascaded from the sky like a twisting waterfall, and was silently absorbed into her body.

The outrushing of departed spirits finally abated. The queen serenely retrieved the veil at her feet, wrapped it around herself and walked away, leaving only the dead in her wake.

The truly dead.

Before she came to this hell on earth, the vultures were there. The wolves were there. Things living among the dying. The rotting bodies and stench of decaying flesh was, at the same time, a paradoxical proof of life.

All gone. It had been torn out by the roots. The corpses that remained after she left had turned to mummies, no more alive than a hollow wooden idol. The birds and beasts were no different, lying on their sides in a similar state of depletion. Most noticeably, the smell of death had vanished.

The place had been “purified” in the most literal sense. Here was a true hell, far more demonic than a killing ground piled with bodies, a true *nothingness*, where the dead lost their souls along with their lives.

The wave of hopelessness assaulted Sayaka. At some point, the Assyrian Queen Semiramis would become the consort of her old nemesis, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II.

In her dreams, the days and years that passed before her eyes took but a moment. But Sayaka’s fatigue seemed more the accumulation of all twenty-five hundred years.

Can I die? she had to wonder. *Can I die in a dream?*

She didn’t know.

Except that in order for that woman to reincarnate herself, it was necessary that Sayaka be extinguished. In that case, if Sayaka could end her life first, then that woman would not be released into the world.

Sayaka vowed in her heart. She would not hesitate. She barely understood what was going on, but she understood this much—it was better for her to die than free that goddess of death.

Strangely enough, Sayaka felt a sense of calm as she sought out a means of death. When she was in high school, as part of her anti-terrorist training, she learned how to stop her heart for a short time and play dead. If she didn’t start it beating again, she would never open her eyes again.

What are you saying? Your life is mine. Don’t think you can do with it whatever you wish.

No, I will die. And you too. You will never return to this world again.

Sayaka concentrated her consciousness into her heart. *Goodbye, father. Doctor Mephisto. And—*

Kyoya-san.

Her pulse slowed. In her dream, her consciousness was wrapped in darkness. A fierce shock made her forget everything and open her eyes.

She was once again in the desert of death. The queen was inspecting the

battlefield, accompanied by the three knights and a company of stalwart soldiers. The queen came to an unexpected halt. Two figures appeared before her. One was an old wizard bearing a long staff. One was a stalwart young man.

The moment she set her eyes upon them—two travelers of the sort that could be found anywhere—she stopped in her tracks, as if the earth had frozen around her feet. Not only her, but the three knights as well halted as soon as they caught sight of them.

The soldiers alone sensed nothing alarming about their presence and circled the unexpected intruders, their spears leveled.

“Who are you?” the men demanded. “Identify yourselves!”

The two betrayed no signs of fear. They looked at the queen, then at the three knights. The older of the two said, “Sinners and their sins, drenched in blood.”

“Insolence!” barked one of the soldiers, hurling his spear. Nothing less would be expected of her retainer.

The weapon hummed through the air. The old man’s chest put up no more resistance than tissue paper as it passed through.

“Well, that was rude,” he exclaimed. “But as the monarch goes, so go the retainers. They are no more disciplined than herself.”

The young man rejoined, “Shall we teach them some manners, Doctor Faustus? Perhaps share with them the pain and sorrow of the dead?”

“That would be fine. It would do Semiramis here a world of good.”

“Aye aye,” the young man answered.

As he reached to his waist and seized a long thin shaft of wood, the soldiers finally took note of his Oriental features. The moon at last peeked out from behind the clouds. The soldiers gulped. The queen herself moaned. Such was the comely countenance of the white-haired old man, that transcended time itself.

As a young man, he bragged that his beauty could make any woman his prisoner. He was not proved wrong. The young man’s name was Semulia. The old man was Doctor Faustus.

The soldiers flung a dozen spears at the two travelers. Being struck by one would have proved fatal. They flew as swift as a flock of swallows. The young man's pole surely flashed faster than lightning.

A collective gasp—from the queen and the three knights.

No sooner had the young man's spinning pole deflected one spear but the rest tumbled through the air and fell like a pile of sticks at his feet. The spears struck by the young man's pole almost seemed to come alive, whirling about and striking another, which struck another, one after another—or rather, all at once—falling like dominoes as if self-destructing upon losing sight of their purpose.

“Splendid!” the three knights said together. “Now let us match our skill against yours.”

They lined up and were about to press closer when the queen stopped them. “No. You are no match for these two. I will deal with them myself.”

“But—” The knights wavered.

“No,” she repeated sternly, and stepped forward alone, the hilt of a long sword jutting from her back swaying back and forth with each step.

She reached back and drew it.

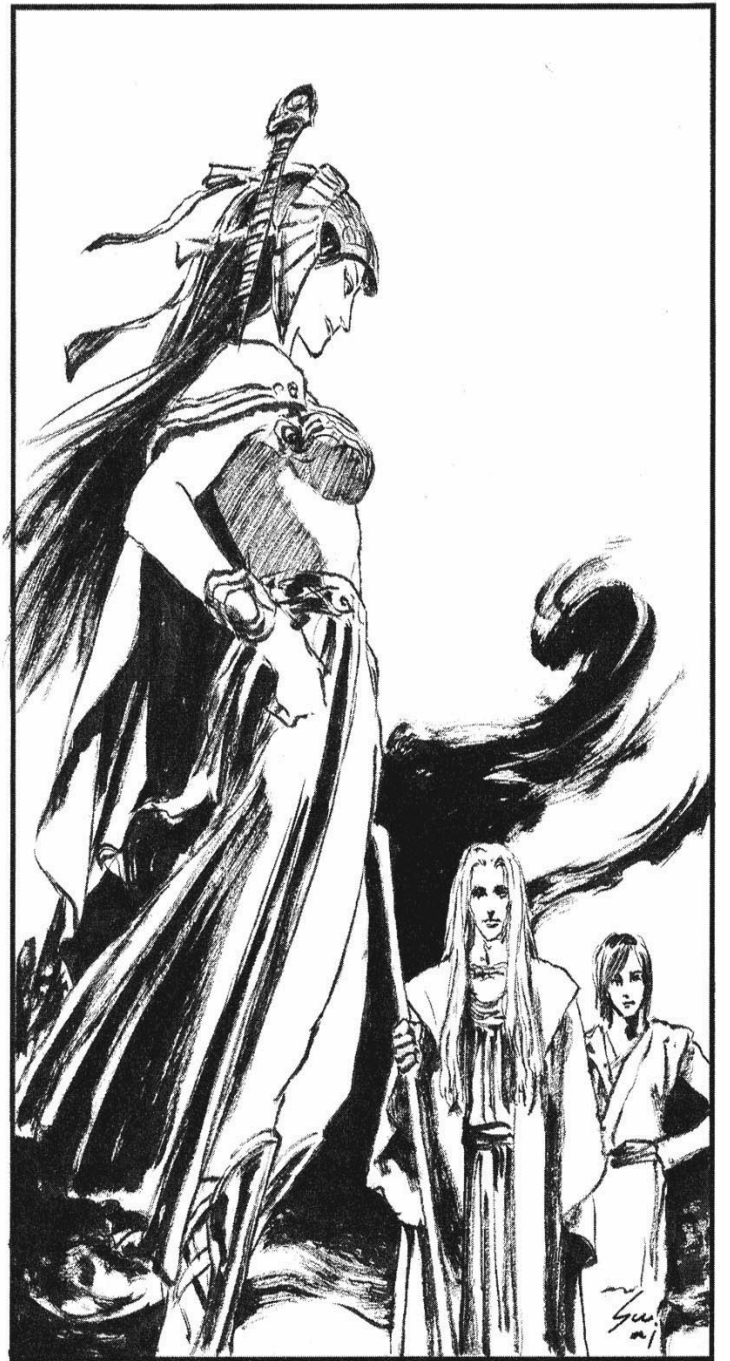
And screamed as a line pierced the valley between her breasts. The old man called Faustus had picked a spear off the ground and flung it through her chest. The queen smiled and yanked it out. Not a drop of blood or a bruise marred her skin.

“I should have expected no less from Semiramis,” said Faustus. “An immortal body bound to an evil spirit. There is presently no way of vanquishing such a foe. In time, though, a righteous soul will appear.”

“Enough with your prattling.”

The words hadn't left her mouth before the queen sprinted at Semulia, the young man. Against a body that could recover so quickly from such a wound, could any form of combat be effective?

The queen's long sword slashed directly at the young man's head. He moved, gracefully and slowly, as if pulled into the tearing currents of wind.



Victory! she exclaimed, even as the young man's rod struck her chest, delivering a blow to her senses like nothing she had ever felt before. The fierce and yet somehow invigorating shock raced through her body, rendering her unconscious.

The soldiers in a row looked on horrified as she was blown backwards ten feet. They must have also felt as if they too were in the dream, and could not believe their eyes.

"Tell King Nebuchadnezzar," Doctor Faustus said to no one in particular. His voice scorched their ears. "That the death's dream kingdom you sought—that this woman sought—now comes to an end. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon return to history, to legends, to the dust. Semulia's strength is not now sufficient to deliver Semiramis to an eternal death. Until that time comes, I will call forth the power to seal the soul of the demoness within the body of one pure of heart. Our work here is done. But we will meet once again in the distant future."

The young man smiled.

As she was being absorbed into the hazy nothingness of the queen's mind, Sayaka smiled back at him. She had never seen his face before, but she knew it better than anybody else in this world. He was—

"Now you know?" Doctor Mephisto's voice rang like a bell in her ear.

"I know myself," Sayaka answered softly. Her head was clear. Doctor Mephisto's drug had no side effects. "That person exists inside of me. You wish her freed to conquer me. When she conquers my soul, the queen will reincarnate." Sayaka looked at the masked man, the man brought back to life from the ancient darkness. Nebuchadnezzar II. "This castle was surely built for that purpose. I don't know what good it will do, but I will not lose."

Doctor Mephisto turned to Nebuchadnezzar. "That is what it comes down to. What is your next move?"

"Seeing as you were so good to come here, let us continue with the experiment. Is that agreeable with the young lady?"

"Yes," Sayaka nodded resolutely, willing to bet her life—her soul—on her own field of combat.

“Well, then. This way,” the masked lord said. “The work of saving my wife within you now begins.”

Part Six: The Mountain Peaks of God

I

White.

Only white.

White as far as the eye could see.

And within that white world something moved. A small boy of seven or eight. The round face peeking out from the earmuffs and the collar of the yak hair coat was dark and sunburned.

He was in the midst of the Gangkhar Puensum range. Rising almost twenty-five thousand feet above sea level, this trio of peaks was among the highest in the Himalayas. So close to heaven, the sun beat down, mercilessly scorching human skin.

The boy was climbing a ridgeline of the mountain. Though the slope here was not steep, the ground was blanketed with snow. One misstep and he would sink out of sight, not to mention the ever-present danger of avalanche.

His ancestors had been coming here for over a hundred and fifty years. Life in this mountainous terrain was lived at the mercy of the elements. But the boy's gait was steady and sure, because since he was born, waiting for him at the end of the road was someone he enjoyed playing with more than anything.

Before long he found the trail along the ridgeline, and climbed the rock-strewn path to a strangely flat promontory. He'd long become accustomed to it, but still felt a sense of fear and an accompanying unfathomable feeling upon seeing it, this wild plain in the mountains known as the Seat of God.

Not a single rock conformed to expectations. Triangles and cones and mallet shapes resting on perfectly round sides—a jumble of boulders that only a mad geologist would assert that nature had formed.

The large number shaped like flat-topped pedestals stood out in particular. Statues of the Buddha and the Dalai Lama sitting cross-legged, or in the *seiza* style, were perched atop them, contemplating the universe and Divine Providence.

This place was called the Seat of God, and was also the place to know God.

The boy wove adroitly among and between them and approached a corner adjacent the opposite slope. There a young man sat cross-legged on what looked like a very large millstone, his eyes closed in contemplation.

“I brought it, Izayoi.”

He reached into the coat and brought out a British tabloid. The young man’s face was also darkly-tanned. His bright mischievous eyes opened.

“Thanks, Tarta,” he said, taking the newspaper.

A British tabloid arrived among the supplies three times a week at a village two hundred yards directly below them, where a British-American research weather station was located. The boy — Tarta — had brought a copy. Of course, it was a week late.

Izayoi unfolded the wrinkled newsprint and devoured its contents. This Seat of God was the place where his father Genichiro once arduously studied the mysteries of yoga. Following more or less in his footsteps, approximately two weeks before, Kyoya had jetted here from Tokyo.

Though considering the devotion he gave to the tabloid’s Page Three girl, his dedication to his “studies” might be said to be something less than a hundred percent.

“Izayoi,” Tarta asked. “How is your training going? Whenever I come here, you are meditating there. Have you come to a great realization?”

“Yeah.” Izayoi nodded. “Well, that’s what I’d like to say. But sadly, no. I can see where you’re coming from. It’s gotta be a weird sight, a seventeen or eighteen-year-old kid comes all the way to the Himalayas and sits on a rock every day. On top of everything else, if I suddenly came up with the meaning of the universe or whatnot, the Buddha himself would bust a gut. Fact is, I don’t know a damned thing.”

“But Izayoi, all day and night, you have such a serious expression on your face. You must be thinking about something. Even if nothing comes to you, it’s still an amazing feat.”

“Oh, please. A kid like you, nine years old and fluent in Japanese and English—that’s a lot more impressive in my book.”

“My village hosts mountain climbers from all over the world. Anybody my age can speak the same way.”

“Then everybody in your village is a genius.” He wasn’t kidding. His eyes were drawn back to the paper. “What the hell! *Second Devil Quake assaults Shinjuku!*” Ignoring Tarta’s startled reaction at his loud exclamation, he continued, “All those injured from the Second Devil Quake come to three thousand seven hundred. Total damage is currently estimated at five hundred million yen.”

He read the lead out loud, and then concentrated silently on the rest of the article.

The Second Devil Quake had struck Shinjuku two weeks before at three o’clock in the morning. There were reasons enough to reject this designation. Since the first, Shinjuku hadn’t experienced a single aftershock, and the destruction and confusion was hardly on a par with its predecessor.

Before and after it, Shinjuku had experienced a strange increase in potential energies that seemed to spur on all manner of crimes and violent behaviors. According to the newspaper’s account, the Second Devil Quake emerged as an outlet for those unconstrained forces.

“Not hardly!” said Kyoya, whacking the paper against his knees. “That’s definitely not it! This Second Devil Quake may be a violent outpouring of energy, but in any case the cause is that weird castle. Babylon Palace and that masked lord. He’s up to something. Man, that guy pisses me off.”

“At times like that, I always do this!” Tarta held up a large and small pair of skis and poles. “When I get angry, this always calms me down. Izayoi, you’re the first person to beat me. Let’s do a run together!”

“That really wasn’t what I had in mind.” Kyoya frowned. The kid looked like

a puppy about to whimper. Instead of brushing him off, he grinned. In a small voice he said, “Sorry, Sayaka-chan,” and nimbly slipped off the stone platform. He snugged Asura under his arm. “Well, let’s go.”

A minute later they were sliding down the slopes, the wind whistling past at an intimidating speed. Needless to say, these slopes boasted nothing so civilized as ski lifts. After dropping a hundred and fifty feet in elevation, they’d have to climb back to the ridgeline and return to the promontory.

Nevertheless, depending on their abilities, a hundred and fifty feet became a quarter-mile, their youth being willing to pay the price later.

Kyoya was a few yards behind him when Tarta glanced back in surprise. Kyoya wasn’t using the poles. Instead, he maintained his balance with Asura, and changed directions with his feet and hips.

The slope steadily narrowed on the right. The two were running practically parallel with the grade of the ridgeline. A dull sound echoed like an enormous bass drum.

Kyoya looked over his right shoulder and shouted, “Faster, Tarta! Avalanche!”

It didn’t need saying. This Himalayan kid was a hundred times more accustomed to the snow and the environment. Without looking back, he quickened his pace. Behind them came the unmistakable roar of the huge volume of snow as it tumbled down the slope, throwing up a curtain of white.

They weren’t going to make it.

“Izayoi!”

“Grab hold, Tarta!”

Mother Nature screamed her banshee’s war cry directly behind him. Kyoya reached out and pulled the boy to him, skidding sideways and slowing at the same time. The frozen tidal wave of snow reared up, the wall of ice filling his vision as it thundered toward them.

A hundred and fifty feet separated them, a hundred and twenty, a hundred—

“Izayoi!” shouted the boy.

The wooden sword traced an arc in front of his eyes. “Like you said, I’ve

kicked things up a notch recently. Now for a little demonstration of Izayoi Kenpo.”

He brought down Asura in a vertical slash. A moment later, they disappeared beneath the crashing waves of snow. Except—the waves split in two. Asura divided everything it touched, sending the mountains of snow flying to the left and right.

Leaving the two of them untouched, the avalanche swept on down the mountain. When the primordial peace and quiet finally returned, the dome of snow over their heads also fell apart in equal pieces, revealing a sliver of the blue sky above.

Tarta looked at him with admiring eyes. “Your kenpo is something else, Izayoi.”

“Yeah, but stay close for the time being. The guys who caused that avalanche are in for a little payback.”

Kyoya concentrated strength into his legs. Manipulating the skis, he stepped out of the snow, and reflexively pulled back his head as a flash of black lightning skimmed past the tip of his nose and buried itself in the snow.

“What the—”

It was an arrow, the same as had been fired at the place where an avalanche could be most easily triggered. Kyoya directed his gaze to the top of the slope, from where the arrow had been fired.

And where there were now two of his foes. The lance-bearing knight in blue armor — Valen. The six-armed green knight bristling with bows and arrows— Mathias. Astride armored horses, they stared down silently at him.

Kyoya said softly, “I thought you weren’t big on the cowardly attacks.” Too much shouting could cause another avalanche. And these guys could tell what he was saying in any case. “Yeah, come to think of it, your big-talking boss isn’t around, is he? When the cat’s away, I guess. No honor among thieves.”

Kyoya’s voice dripped with sarcasm. Livid with anger, the two started down the snowy slopes. That alone didn’t start an avalanche, because of the anti-gravity or magnetic propulsion mechanisms housed in the horses or the armor.

“Vian is loath to leave our master’s side,” said the bow-bearing Mathias. “So we came instead. Think of that arrow just now as a test. Were it enough to kill you, it would have been better not going into battle in the first place.”

“You’re sounding awfully high and mighty for a two-bit rent-a-cop,” Kyoya spat out. He jostled Tarta on his left shoulder. “The kid part of your test too?”

The two knights exchanged glances. “Put him down,” Mathias said.

“Naw. No guarantee you’re not going to turn around and use him as a shield.”

“You plan to face off against us with him clinging to you like that?”

“Spare me,” Kyoya shot back. “While you’ve been sitting around polishing your armor, I’ve been working my fingers to the bone. Speaking of which, now would be a good time for the two of *you* to take a hike.”

The knights looked at each other again. Their shoulders shook with laughter. Valen raised the lance. “Then you can die with the child in your arms. I’ll skewer the two of you at once.”

“Showing your true colors, eh? So much for all that chivalry crap. I don’t know what you’re hiding beneath that armor, but after twenty-five hundred years, apparently the only thing that gets your rocks off is killing people. Don’t you find yourselves rather pathetic?”

Kyoya’s provocations had an effect, for Valen up and charged. The horse’s hooves pounded against the snow. The snow didn’t fly up and scatter. Because he was sailing through the air.

“*Haa!*”

With a fighting shout, Kyoya turned his back to the enemy and started down the steepening mountainside. Speed wasn’t the problem. Valen’s was nothing compared to the avalanche. But the spear flew at Kyoya’s back with the velocity of a rifle shot.

As if anticipating the course ahead of time, it turned down the slope. Kyoya raised Asura in one hand. A pretty chime of wood against metal indicated the collision. The spear jumped into the air.

The two of them crisscrossed and separated. As Valen brought up the horse

and started after Kyoya again, he couldn't ignore the strange sensation in his own body.

His right half was growing numb, the result of the blow from the kid. When they had fought in Babylon Palace in Shinjuku, he'd been forewarned of the kid's terrific talents and after the fact had no reason to doubt them. But he'd experienced nothing like this strange damage.

Despite carrying on in his carefree manner, the kid must have engaged in rigorous, gut-wrenching training on this mountain. Checking his fear and wonder, Valen gripped the spear with his numb fingers and yanked on the reins. He descended the slope at a speed close to free fall.

"Doesn't seem to have learned his lesson," Kyoya muttered to himself. But that was all beside the point. The guy could do nothing but fight. Before coming here, he'd spent some time in the Shinjuku ward library going through the history books.

Perhaps because the colors of their armor—like they were scooped out of a carton of Neapolitan ice cream—called such attention to themselves, their names popped up in several reference volumes.

In ancient Assyria, three knights of Marduk served as the personal bodyguards to Queen Semiramis. Daring and resolute, it was said that on at least eighty-eight occasions, armed with a long sword, a long lance, and long bow, the three had taken on and destroyed entire army divisions fielded by their enemies.

The question was how they'd come to be reincarnated.

The memory restoration machines at the Japan section of the World Federation Government had informed Sayaka that she'd been Semiramis in a previous life, which would mean by implication that her husband was Nebuchadnezzar II. Except that how he had come back to life, and to what ends, remained up in the air.

According to the ancient manuscripts, in the vicinity of Assyria and Babylon at the time, there blossomed an advanced scientific civilization that developed methods of artificial hibernation and technologies for increasing human longevity.

The air shook. Kyoya swung his sword without turning around, relying on his senses alone. The five arrows flying at him scattered on the ground. With a sweep of Asura, one struck the other and it collided with the other, all obstructing the trajectories of the other.

Observing this may have rekindled in Mathias, closing behind him, a memory from long ago—the second knight—the skills of Semulia.

He shot six more arrows. Two burrowed beneath the snow, two veered to the right and left, the final two pounced upon him from the air. This was the secret technique called “Mathias’s Tiger,” from which no enemy could escape.

This time, he saw his target—the wooden sword—dip into the field of snow. The whole world went white. Snow erupted all around him, totally obscuring his surroundings. A second late in bringing the horse to a halt, he plunged through the wall.

“Returning the package to sender!” called out Kyoya.

The six arrows he’d shot came flying back at him, thudding into his body in six places. Together with the horse, he sprawled across the snowy ground.

II

Manipulating his *nenpo*, Kyoya passed through the wall of snow he'd raised and sought out his remaining opponent. Studded with his own arrows, Mathias lay there like a rock.

"*I'm here,*" reverberated a low voice.

Kyoya looked up at the black splotch carved out of the blue sky twenty yards above his head. "You still want to fight? Maybe I should give that horse a little Novocain treatment too."

"Now the true contest begins," Valen said. "We three knights of Marduk cannot condone defeat. Nor can we allow any word of our defeat to be whispered abroad. Only to take our secrets to the grave. Except I won't be dying today. This lance is packed with the same nuclear materials used in the construction of the dams and irrigation canals along the Tigris and Euphrates. In a second, I could reduce a radius of half a mile to ash without a speck of radioactive fallout. So no need to worry about that."

"Well, that just makes me one happy camper." Kyoya pointed Asura at the sky. But no matter how much he disciplined his Izayoi *nenpo*, there were limits to its reach. "Problem is, you got your big brother down here. What about that? Your bomb will take out him too."

"Fools and losers should shoulder the weight of failure and die happily in recompense."

"Oh, good grief," Kyoya exclaimed, more annoyed than panicked.

The guy was going to drop a bomb on his head and there was nothing he could do about it. There was no time to run and no place to hide. He had one ace left up his sleeve. He wasn't sure it was ready for prime time. But like they said, necessity was the mother of invention. Still—

“Hey, do you think you could give me a sec—?”

In that moment, a white object separated itself from the horse and rider. The long lance. A dozen feet or so above his head, it began to fission. Just as Valen promised, the fireball engulfed the ground for a half-mile around them.

The fireball dissipated. The light faded. The scorched rocks and boulders again came into view. Valen wheeled the horse around and set it down in a corner of the promontory.

He had salvaged the reputation of the three knights of Marduk—that was his only consolation. It was too bad about Mathias, but he would relay to Vian how he had fought. Though Valen had destroyed Semulia, Mathias had done his part too. *Sleep well.*

Having confirmed that nothing was moving on the blackened slope, he turned around. And froze.

Kyoya and the boy Tarta were standing on a rock less than ten feet away. “You said no radioactivity, right?”

Kyoya grinned, and that told Valen he wasn’t imagining things.

“He was your big brother and all, and you went ahead and did it. That’s the knights of Marduk for you, I guess. No sparing the rod and all.”

Kyoya’s smile vanished as he settled into fighting mode. Valen reached with his left hand for the spear in the saddle. No sooner had he released it from its holder and brought it around to bear than Kyoya was right in his face.

Asura swept down, halting mere fractions of an inch before striking the horse’s neck. In that moment, Valen soared into the air.

While flying upwards, he threw the lance downwards. Kyoya repelled it at the last second, but lost his balance and wavered back and forth on the boulder.

This was the opportunity Valen was waiting for. Switching positions in midair, he drew a short sword from his waist and plunged down on Kyoya.

Shit! was Kyoya’s only thought. He didn’t have time to straighten and meet the attack head on. His next reaction was anything but a thought-through strategy. It was the instinctual response of a tested warrior.

He cast aside all his collected strength and conscious thought and fell to the boulder. A tenth of a second later, the blade at the end of Valen's lance swept through the air in exactly the place Kyoya's neck had been.

The shockwave of Kyoya's shout reached Valen's ears the same time Asura shot up to connect with his midsection. Valen flew into the air and tumbled into the bottom of a ravine a good distance from the promontory like a human-shaped stone.

"Damn and blast!"

Kyoya sprang to his feet. He hadn't meant to throw him that far. A purely instinctual muscular response. He ran to the edge of the cliff, but Valen had already disappeared from view.

"So that's that for those two, and after surviving two thousand years. Idiots."

He said it sadly, a shadow eclipsing his features. But soon returned to the matter at hand.

"If they're on that level, then I've trained myself to the point where I think I can make an even fight on my hand. But their big brother's waiting there, and that monster in the mask. Badasses both. Time to take ten and then finish the job."

A strange atmosphere shrouded Shinjuku. On the surface, it manifested itself in wanton violence and criminality. A martial arts master hopped up on steroids was arrested after attacking total strangers on the street and delivering bone-crushing karate chops to their necks. Street gangs packing laser heat burst into banks and murdered everybody inside.

Giant eagles carried away small children and gathered in the skyscraper district in West Shinjuku. The mayor requested airborne countermeasures from the Ministry of Defense.

Day by day, the collective sense of unease grew stronger—that deeper down, behind it all, lurked an altogether unique, powerful and positively hair-raising phenomenon.

Something was different, something was somehow different. Something humans should not know. Something inherent in Shinjuku itself was welling up

and drifting down the streets and thoroughfares, getting under the skin of pedestrians, unsettling their states of mind, causing them to do things they never would have otherwise.

Something that even the most zealous residents of Shinjuku couldn't be expected to understand. They became no less captives of the weirdness than the regular tourists.

The substance of the abnormalities began to express itself in the most mundane everyday activities.

A bruised and battered man was carted off to the hospital after repeatedly trying to leave the apartment where he'd lived for years—without opening the door.

A woman walking down the stairs from her condo suddenly forgot how to walk down a flight of stairs and squatted there, unmoving, until the EMTs carted her away.

A boy grew so afraid of his own bed that he broke through the ceiling and crammed the fearful thing into the attic and slept soundly on the tatami.

A man who, key in hand, wrenched his finger sticking it into the lock and trying to open the door.

A girl hit by a car when she thought she was walking forward and instead went backwards.

These were but minor manifestations of the abnormal vibe gripping the city. Neither humans nor animals paid attention to its true dreadfulness. Their attention was directed to the heavy death toll caused by the most recent Devil Quake, and to the rampaging criminals taking advantage of the chaos.

Reading the ancient manuscript, Doctor Mephisto raised his head and turned toward the door. He'd left the door open, and now the frame contained the silhouette of the lord of the castle, King Nebuchadnezzar II.

“All this studying is bad for you.”

Mephisto nodded in the direction of the voice. “In fact, these books and documents are most fascinating. The day was gone before I knew it.”

The number of books filling this space—as large as the lobby of a luxury hotel—would have to be counted in the millions. Not only tomes written in dead languages, but rows of worn and tattered items woven from papyrus as well.

“What are you perusing?” The mask scanned the title of the manuscript and exclaimed softly.

“Your book,” Doctor Mephisto answered coolly.

“Where did you find it? I wrote it so long ago I had forgotten about it myself.”

“I was wandering about the stacks when it all but jumped out at me, as if begging me to read it.”

“Really.”

“I do understand at last,” Mephisto said, looking at the masked lord with bright eyes. Deep within the endless black eyes was a glimmer of gold.

“What?”

“Your purpose for this city.”

“Oh?” The mask answered shortly.

“You said you didn’t build this palace to console your mountain-bred wife, and that is the case. But of course. The reason you chose Shinjuku. The battlefield Rama-san wandered through in her memories makes sense in this light. Love is strong indeed, but this is madness.”

“Have you never loved another person, Doctor?” the mask asked in a hoarse voice.

“Well.”

“I have loved but once. The result is what stands before you now. And yet I have no objections.”

“A submission to fate is not always for the best.” Mephisto spoke in an unusually gentle voice, the voice he normally used when examining a patient. “And how fares your wife?” he asked, changing the subject.

The amount of time the spirit body of Semiramis tarried in the world—distinct and apart from Sayaka’s physical being—was slowly but inexorably growing, as

was her ability to choose the time and the place. The product of the strange medicines and machines this palace produced.

It spoke as well to the trials of Sayaka's spirit and soul in the face of total annihilation.

Knowing that, what was Mephisto up to? He was up to nothing. The Demon Physician did not interfere with the mask's actions, but only stood by and watched. When the mask was not present, he chatted with Sayaka or strolled the grounds of the palace and listened to the songs of the birds fluttering about.

Now and then, a beautiful woman other than Sayaka appeared alongside him, an android dispatched by the mask, or another woman.

"What do you intend to do, Doctor?" the mask asked.

"Do?"

"Knowing the purpose of this palace and my intentions, as a doctor residing in Shinjuku, you must be considering countering actions and strategies."

"That all depends on her."

"Depends on her how?"

"It was Semiramis who invited me here, and undoubtedly her desire that you leave me to my own devices. I am doing nothing more here than waiting."

"And who told you such things?"

"Who?"

"These past several days, the gremlins have made reports of you and Semiramis engaging in intimate conversations."

"Oh, something a little bird told me. Our conversations have consisted of ordinary chit-chat."

"And that settles that, you suppose? What else?" The mask gently took Mephisto's hand in his own. "So beautiful, enough even to dazzle the eyes of a man. Any woman would be all the more bewitched. I have heard that half the visitors to your hospital are lovesick over you. And of those admitted, the greater number refuse to leave after they've been cured. Because of your sinful

presence.”

He gazed down at Mephisto’s hand. The Demon Physician’s eyes narrowed. In a flash, the slender pale hand. In a flash, the hand turned ashen gray.

“What do you think of my power of thought? A psychic power taught me by a wizard from Cappadocia while immersing myself in those same pure waters as my wife. It seems the times have left you behind, Doctor. Your heart will soon be the same as your hand, Doctor Faustus.”

“I guess it cannot be helped.” As he spoke, the dead color vanished from Mephisto’s hand.

The mask jumped backward, chanting something under his breath, and forming a curious shape with his hands. Wind roared, blasting Mephisto up into the air. Contact with the wall—any hard surface—would turn his internal organs to jelly.

The wind suddenly ceased. Mephisto landed silently on the floor. The mask looked at him amazed. No, the wind was still blowing. And yet it disturbed Mephisto not at all. He seemed to be absorbing the air into his body.

Mephisto unfurled his cape. The inside of the cape was black as well. Stars glittered in the depths of its folds. The universe resided inside his cape.

Supported by the two beautiful white hands, the hems of the rectangle of fabric fluttered around the dark void in which twinkled the light of ten billion stars. The mask’s magical wind was drawn into its infinite depths.

Just as abruptly, the universe closed in on itself as Mephisto drew the cape across his chest. At the last moment, a hand jutted out, grasping a silver ring of light.

“In appreciation for that cool breeze, I will put on my own show for you. Behold Doctor Mephisto’s wirework.”

He raised his hand, and was clearly going to swing it down over the mask. But didn’t complete the motion. Another hand, whiter than his own, gently reached out to stop his.

“Semiramis.”

She smiled at the sound of her husband's voice. "Oh, stop it. You're both important to me. Getting into a fight here does more harm than any good."

"The lady of the house."

Doctor Mephisto reverentially bowed his head and took the hand holding his wrist and brought it to his lips.

"Whenever I look at it, this always strikes me as a lovely room," Semiramis said, gazing about with moist eyes. "The odor of ancient books, of mildew and silverfish. Coming here takes me back to the old country." She turned her attention to the mask, standing there as if at attention. "I have something to say to the good doctor. Doctor Faustus. We should like the room to ourselves."

"Fine," the mask said, though his ready assent was laden with ominous tones.

After he left, the woman stood directly in front of Mephisto and looked into his beautiful and mysterious face with seductive eyes.



“Your husband seems upset.”

“Oh, he’s always like that, concerned about me. We’ve lost a good many retainers because of it.”

“There was something you wished to ask me?”

“Don’t be so distant. You haven’t thanked me for pointing out that book to you.”

“But of course.”

“Why do you think I did so?”

“I wouldn’t presume to say,” Mephisto answered brusquely. Aside from her being another man’s wife, it was as if her very essence aroused in him a deep and abiding feeling of aversion toward her.

“I have been waiting to meet you for such a long time.”

“My, my.”

She softly stroked his cheek. “Loathsome man. Disguised as an old wizard, you sealed me inside the body of that young girl. How many times have I resolved to return the favor? And now I have at last set eyes upon you.”

Her fingers drew an arc across his skin, the force sufficient to raise five streaks of red. Mephisto’s blood. The streams trickled down to the line of his jaw. Oozing sensuality, she brought her mouth up to the dripping blood.

When she pulled away, her lips were redder than the scarlet skin. “I’ll kill you some day. Or right away. In the most awful and feared way this world has to offer. You dreadful man.”

Her dainty chin jerked up, seized by Mephisto’s hand. “Can you? Can the Queen of Death kill the Demon Physician?”

Mephisto’s gaze and voice engulfed the beautiful woman like smoldering amber. She shut her enraptured eyes. Her lips trembled. She took a breath. Mephisto’s mouth covered hers.

She moaned. A moment later, Mephisto was alone again in the old library, his arms forming an incomplete circle, as if wrapped around an invisible person.

“You invited me here to kill me, Semiramis?” he whispered to the empty air. “I accepted knowing you would try. Ha, so we could love each other in all our mutual hatreds. Alas, we were never the kind who would lie awake at night enjoying a little night music.”

Mephisto’s voice drifted away into the distance.

Part Seven: The Mountain Peaks of God

I

A beautiful moon hung in the night sky.

Kyoya opened his eyes. He was sitting on the rock, legs crossed in the lotus position. The discipline and training required to amass spiritual power was entering, as planned, its final stretch.

Up till now, unbelievable things had occurred around him. Hungry wolves had crept onto the promontory and prowled around, growling in their throats and sniffing the air. And yet they didn't once dare bite.

It was like Kyoya didn't exist there. Or rather, that his presence meant more to them than the trees or the stones. Gnashing their teeth, they left and went elsewhere to fill their bellies.

From time to time, when Kyoya climbed down from the rock and strode around the promontory, he noticed he was walking *through* the boulders. *A mind cleared of all mundane thoughts can quench fire.* When Nobunaga Oda attacked Keirin Temple in the province of Ka, this was the incantation chanted by the monks perched on the gates as he attempted to burn them alive.

Though in this case, even the rocks began to fade at his touch. Such was the result of spiritual training in the ultimate mountain aesthetic of the Himalayas, and absorbing the energy of the universe pouring down.

Of course, he came down from the rock to exercise his kenpo.

There was a graveyard next to a village at the foot of the mountain, haunted by the usual evil spirits and residual ghosts, or *restligeists*. Kyoya purified them all. They thanked him and left. At one time he would have simply vanquished them. That alone was evidence of an increase in spiritual strength.

But it still wasn't enough.

In order to counter the masked lord's secret ability to send his own psychic energy back at him, Kyoya had no choice in these three final days but to shoot for the top in one fell swoop.

There'd be no taking it easy. Not to mention, according to the newspaper Tarta had brought, the weird goings-on in Demon City. Even Chief Yamashina had gone to check it out. Things were growing stranger and stranger and there was still no word from Mephisto. Similar messages were coming into the bureau on a daily basis.

In any case, only Kyoya's character could have brought him this far. His cells had activated in a flash as they absorbed the energy filling the universe. For over two weeks, he hadn't drunk a drop of water.

This energy of the universe was suffused with the pure powers of creation. If anybody else—witch, warlock, psychic warrior—whose psychic powers were not matched to its nature, the result would be instant death.

In that sense, there could be no one more perfectly attuned than Kyoya.

Now he opened his eyes. Oddly enough, a color approaching fear rose to his face. He quietly turned precisely in the direction of Tokyo.

"This feeling—" he muttered. "Today is the day." He bit his lip. "But how do I return?"

He heard footsteps. Not along the ridgeline. From the ravine below, traveling up the gentle slope. A single pair of footsteps in the snow.

Kyoya waited silently. He knew who he was waiting for. The strength of the approaching spirit raised goose bumps on his skin. A concentrated lump of malice.

The figure that soon appeared behind the stone pedestal was covered in armor and carrying a long lance under his arm. It was Valen. Valen's ghost carried about him a fierce and evil power that buffeted him.

"I've come to renew our contest," said the voice of the ghost.

"Let's have at it, then," Kyoya answered without hesitation. Saving hate-crazed souls was the province of *nenpo* as well.

He descended from the stone table and settled into a fighting stance. Nothing fancy. He wasn't showing off. The normal *en garde* position.

Valen said nothing. He let the lance speak for him. Kyoya batted it away, and felt a cold chill run through him, the violent manifestation of Valen's malice. Slipping through the garden of strange stones, Kyoya pivoted to his right.

The lance pulverized the boulder and arced through the air. Kyoya parried it left and closed the gap between them in a flash. Valen pulled back the lance. Drawing him in, perhaps. The parry had left Kyoya's right hand numb.

A stone Buddha stood between him and Valen. That was when he heard a strange voice. He heard it because of his now heightened senses.

Kyoya-san, come quickly. Sayaka's voice. Those words crystallized in his being. He took off at full speed. *I'm coming, Sayaka-chan.*

When he'd cleared the row of stone columns, the enchanted lance came at him. Asura sprang out. The tip of the lance flew into the air. The sword swept down from above his head and struck Valen's neck straight on.

The powers of his thought flowed forth and annihilated.

Kyoya was alone. The moon came out. The stars twinkled in the sky. A holy night in the Himalayas.

"I guess he's really gone," he said, in tones as relaxed as his features.

At the last moment, he knew he had heard Valen's voice. *Thank you.* He too had been freed from the destructive delusions of the world.

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." A fierce sense of conviction colored his face. It was soon replaced by one of human concern. "But how the hell do I get back to Japan?"

Doctor Mephisto gazed at Sayaka in front of him, wondering what to do next.

During this month, the experiments with the spirit of Semiramis taking control of Sayaka's physical body had continued. Today the time had come. Not even Mephisto knew what the golden mask intended to do with Semiramis once she had fully reincarnated. The question hadn't been asked. The answer hadn't been offered.

He had been present during every experimental session, and so was fully apprised of their progress. But it appeared that for all his abilities, the lord of the Demon Palace could not easily revive a soul and command the physical body of another.

Sayaka's soul resisted with a strength that surprised even Mephisto. This willowy young woman had a spine of steel.

The mental powers the golden mask possessed were startling. When he attended the procedures, strange changes arose in the Demon Palace. The power systems largely came to a halt. Considering the amount of energy required to support this structure, the mask's psychic numbers must be astronomical.

Attacked on one side by the mask and on the other by an evil spirit, Sayaka was definitely losing ground. Yet she didn't complain, and neither did Mephisto interfere.

Sayaka intended to ferret out the mask's true intentions. When she made this clear on the first day of the experiment, the mask made a promise.

The experiment was being conducted on the terrace where they viewed the moon. The phantasmal night and the lamp fires of the capital of Babylon glimmered in the distance. Sayaka sat on a chair. The mask thrust out his hands. Sayaka fell into a trance.

"Semiramis," he said.

"Yes," Sayaka said. Her answer came with unusual alacrity.

"Do you understand. It is I. Nebuchadnezzar."

"Yes."

"My dream is at last in my grasp." His voice trembled with joy. His eyes glowed with a blood-red glee.

Perhaps that was when he noticed something strange happening on the green-covered terrace. The fountains of water muddied and oozed. From all across Demon City flowed a white substance like a low-lying fog, disappearing into the openings at the base of Demon Palace Babylon.

A deep growl—not a voice, not a reverberation—echoed through the night air,

the city groaning in pain.

“Do you remember? I built this city and these gardens for you. I beheaded a hundred thousand for your sake, trampled a million more underfoot. All that death and destruction to succor the power you possess, to unbind it and bring to pass miracles of such unspeakable evil, and bring the whole world under my control. You reveled in the blood of the slaughter, and in your joy released your powers. Remember. Remember what happened.”

“I remember. I remember. How could we ever forget? I moved mountains and shaped continents. I formed rivers and caused the rain to fall. I drowned the forces of the enemy and guided the flaming stars down to scorch their cities. Ah, I can hear it even now—the screams as they died, with curses of hatred and venom on their tongues. I am the immortal queen, the woman who consumes the energy of the dead and their angry spirits and lives forever. And yet—and yet—why—”

“Semulia,” said the masked lord, his body shaking with anger. “That wandering warrior who appears always and out of nowhere. He killed you. He killed me. Your power proved fruitless in the face of his abilities. Such frighteningly refined skills. But he is no longer part of this world. Rather, however he may still be part of it, he will be too late this time. Now the world is ours. King Nebuchadnezzar and Queen Semiramis of the great and terrible Babylon. In this most evil city in the world, compared to which Sodom and Gomorrah were mere shadows, you shall drink its eternal energies to your heart’s content, and take hold of reincarnation and immortal life. That is why I chose this place.”

The mask threw back his head and laughed. As did Sayaka, her face suffused with evil rarely seen.

The mask turned to Mephisto. “The promise has been fulfilled. Now the process of reincarnation should be plain. You may go.”

“Not quite yet,” Mephisto softly said, revealing neither in his beautiful visage nor in the depths of his soul the slightest surprise at their appalling pasts and horrifying goals.

“Hoh. What else, then?”

“I have beheld the shape and form of your reincarnation. I need nothing more from you. Now if you would eradicate that woman and restore Sayaka-chan.”

“What are you—”

The eyes in the golden mask focused on Mephisto like a pair of lasers. Mephisto looked back at him. The contest was resolved in an instant, without a sound, with no smoke or fire. The mask reeled, slumped against the stone parapets of the terrace.

“Have you seen it? Mephisto’s evil eye?” the black-clad figure calmly said.

He was wrapped in fire. The flames swept backward, engulfing his cape as it spread out like the wings of a giant black bird of prey, and scattered across the terrace.

“You should have been seared down to your bones. I would expect no less from Doctor Faustus, that most uncommon of wizards.” Only her voice was different. Fixing her glowing eyes on Mephisto, she got up from the chair. “The desires I told to you in the library will now be fulfilled.”

Sayaka smiled seductively. Her disheveled silk gown slipped from her round shoulders, showing the tops of her breasts. And parted around her legs, exposing the tops of her thighs. Her captivating presence now would make the most sober of eyewitnesses doubt that she had ever been that innocent young woman.

This was not Sayaka. This was the incarnation of evil reincarnated inside her, having pushed her righteous soul down into the darkness. Semiramis, the queen of ancient Mesopotamia, once all but erased from history. For all his strengths and resources, could Mephisto hold his own when this demoness unleashed her powers?

“Such beauty should be consecrated to none other than me. Receive the kiss of my mouth and be on your way to destruction.”

The white and wicked hands coiled around Mephisto’s neck and pulled him to her. Their lips overlapped. A groaning sound seeped out from where their mouths met.

Ah, but what fate awaited the Demon Physician? Sucking on his lips in

ecstasy, Semiramis smiled her bewitching smile. She poured strength into her pale hands. Her hands trembled. A moment later, her hands around his throat, Semiramis threw her head back.

“W-what are you doing, bitch!” she cried out with the mien of a monster. That this was Sayaka underneath alone made the appearance a hundred times worse than any “normal” woman. “No. Not her. Not her alone. Y-you—who are you?”

Rivulets of sweat streamed down Sayaka’s cheeks. Her eyes opened wide, eyes devoid of pupils.

“I know. You—you are—”

Sayaka/Semiramis whirled around, focusing her empty eyes on a sturdy figure standing on the edge of the terrace. From those same pair of lips came a pair of sounds, loathing and joy combined.

“Semulia!”

“Kyoya-san!”

II

It was indeed Kyoya.

This young man should be thousands of miles away on a mountain peak, engaged in rigorous mental and physical training. How could he have set foot in this floating palace?

He casually walked toward them, as if his broad smile alone was enough to answer all such questions, radiating a strength and confidence a world apart from before.

“You—!”

Her right hand slashed through the air. A fantastic force tightened around Kyoya, equal to the bear hug of a giant. With a thrust of his elbows, it evaporated without a trace.

“You damned—” she growled.

“Izayoi kenpo.” Kyoya smiled, flashing his white teeth. “With a bit of supercharging, to be sure. I think it’s about time for the fat lady to sing.”

“What are you saying? You dare say such a thing to me? To Semiramis!”

“Hey, it’s a whole new era. It’s been thousands of years. You people have got to get with the times. Give the magic act a rest and go back to sleep in whatever cave you came from.”

“Bastard!” she cried out, and again fell back senseless.

“Impressive,” Mephisto said, without the slightest hint of intonation in his praise. When Kyoya turned his cool gaze on him, he said, “Why the look?”

“Turncoat.”

“That is unkind.”

“I leave a single girl in your care, and you expose her to all kinds of dangers playing around with your dumb hobby. You and me are gonna have words when we get out of this place. Don’t forget.”

“I’m afraid you haven’t been fully apprised of the situation.”

“Meaning what?”

At that moment, the mask seized Sayaka and vaulted away. Kyoya lunged forward with Asura, but concern for Sayaka’s physical well-being delayed his response a split-second. Another leap, and the mask dodged the attack that hummed through the air at his midsection. The two of them disappeared into the palace.

“Wait, dammit!”

Kyoya and Mephisto ran after them. They found themselves in front of the big pool. A single silhouette in red stood there with unusually long arms. The knight Vian. The golden mask and Sayaka were behind him.

Sayaka squirmed and writhed, almost too much for him to handle. The souls of Semiramis and Sayaka struggled for control of her body.

“Why not call it a day?” Kyoya softly suggested.

The red shadow didn’t budge. “What happened to my brothers Valen and Mathias?”

Kyoya averted his eyes. “They are sleeping beneath the Himalayan snow.”

“I see. They were hoping to duel with you. But that gives me all the more reason to fight. First to protect my lord. Second to avenge their deaths.”

“I have no desire to fight you.”

The knight seemed to smile beneath the helmet. “I am Vian, the eldest of the three knights of Marduk. I challenge you in the name of our lives, our souls and our honor.”

Kyoya didn’t reply, but had already assumed a *hasso* stance, with Asura raised over his right shoulder. He stepped forward as if gliding on ice. Sayaka, the mask, and even Mephisto took little note of him, only of that charged space where these radiant warriors battled to tip the balance between life and death.

The knight drew his very long sword. Kyoya felt as if he were being assaulted by a hallucination, Vian's arms were that long. The sword added another ten feet. It was impossible to judge his actual reach, and for a fencer the absence of that bit of information could prove fatal.

He wasn't getting any time to think through the problem. White light flashed up from below. Kyoya twisted his body out of the way and counterattacked, aiming at the forearm. The knight brought his long arm back with amazing swiftness, parried and thrust again.

Kyoya deflected the thrust and Asura spit fire. The knight raised his arms. In this strained stance, Kyoya lunged at his chest. He didn't use his *nenpo*. This was a pure kendo move. Against such an opponent, he wouldn't have used it except as a last resort.

The answering attack came from the *jodan* position, Vian bringing the sword down from directly above his head. The blade threw off a vibe that stood his hair and his spirit on end.

This time, Kyoya's spirit was suffused with the determination of death.

Answering the downwardly sweeping sword with a right jab had nothing to do with victory. It was the unconscious manifestation of the most logical strategy at this moment in time.

Both appeared faster than the other. Both appeared a split-second too slow.

The steel blade snipped through Kyoya's hair and the tip buried itself in the marble floor. Just as the red knight's giant frame flew back through the air with tremendous force and fell down on the edge of the pool.

"Are you all right?" Kyoya called out, running over to where he lay. However he might have to fight him, from the start he'd never had reason to hate him.

The water in the pool roared and rose up before his eyes. The wave turned inside out, bursting from within like a budding flower. A stone statue climbed fifteen feet into the air. This must be the monster that sent that wall of water against him the first time Kyoya had visited the Demon Palace.

The immense frame shook the marble as it stepped out of the pool. Directly beneath its feet was the red knight. The awful crunching sound aroused Kyoya's

ire.

“Son of a bitch!” he shouted, and took off running. He sensed a fierce battle somewhere further away, Mephisto and the golden mask engaged in their own death struggle.

Concentrating all his psychic energies, Kyoya attacked the huge foot that had trodden upon the red knight. The big stone god clasped a hand against its leg. Unlikely that it could feel pain, but even stone could comprehend the *nen*-induced damage.

It swept sideways with its right hand, like a giant scythe. Kyoya struck at the forearm, just as he was thrown backwards. He turned a somersault in the air and landed on his feet.

No sooner had he assumed a fighting stance than the statue was gone. “What the—?” he started to say, as he was forcefully lifted into the air. An arm grew out of the floor, with Kyoya riding on its enormous palm. He didn’t need to be told how space could be warped and twisted here.

Five fingers curled around his chest. Kyoya stabbed Asura into the wrist, burying the sword halfway down the blade. This was one result of his training.

The stone statue spasmed. Kyoya put his shoulder into the thrust. A fissure ran up the arm, the stone shattering as Kyoya jumped down to the floor. The arm vanished. Kyoya glanced toward the pool.

“Mephisto! Look!”

The water in the pool had turned into a blood red tide, as had the water raining down on the plants and flowers. This strange phenomenon must be the consequence of absorbing Demon City’s dormant energies as fuel in the demoness’s reincarnation.

“Above you!” Mephisto called out.

Kyoya dodged to the side. A giant foot came stomping down. The earth shook.

“This freaking Gumby from hell!” Kyoya shouted, hardly the stuff of strict martial training.

He closed his eyes and focused on one particular spot. His eyes flew open. He swung Asura down from the *jodan* position. The air twisted around the tip of the sword like eddies in a stream. The space in front of him split apart, revealing the stone god.

“Leave the rest to me,” Mephisto said in his always calm, cool and collected tones.

“All yours!”

A sliver of silver light racing along above his head. No sooner had it wound around the arms and legs and neck of the giant, but in the blink of an eye the statue weighing hundreds of tons of stone lost its head and all its limbs.

The repeated reverberations shook the floor.

A simple wire had been transformed into a fearsome weapon that could sever stones—this was Doctor Mephisto’s wirework.

Kyoya squatted beside the red knight. “Hang in there,” he said, though the emptiness of such encouraging words was painfully obvious.

“Defeat is death. That is the law of Babylon. I appreciate being able to fight such a valiant warrior.”

“You’re Vian, right?”

“Yes.”

“You ever end up a wandering spirit, feel free to look me up. If a body is what you need, I’ll lend you mine.”

“Thank—you—”

The knight’s head fell back. Kyoya turned away and gazed at Mephisto, his face dark with melancholy. At some point, Mephisto had taken custody of Sayaka.

The mask touched Mephisto’s cape. The two of them were blown backwards, broke through the thick glass doors and fell onto the terrace. Beyond was a sea of blood.

Unleashing an inarticulate roar, Kyoya sprang forward, slashing straight down

at the crown of the golden mask's head.

The mask parried with his left hand. His hand shattered. Asura sank into his skull. This incarnation of evil suddenly crumbled. A moment later, his figure was colored by crimson flames. The entire side of the pool became a sea of fire.

Kyoya ran onto the terrace. Mephisto was standing there, Sayaka in front of him. Sayaka and another woman. Superimposed over that transfixing beauty was the figure of the woman submerged in the waters of the great subterranean temple.

Doctor Mephisto stood rooted there, transfixed.

Semiramis.

She showed none of the fleeting detachment from before. For the first time, her features revealed the full and vivid expression of evil. Freedom was finally in her grasp.

Then what would become of Sayaka?

“Hoh! Free at last! Behold!” Semiramis indicated another set of glass doors. The body of a woman appeared there. This was the body of Semiramis, preserved within the water now pouring off it. “Now it is mine to enter. And when I do, the world once again becomes the means of satisfying my taste for blood. Together with Demon City Babylon—”

She twisted her frame, threw her head back and laughed. A second later, that body was powerfully wrenched. Those wide eyes turned back toward Sayaka, the mouth contorted with hatred and surprise. “How dare you!”

She gasped, reaching out toward her own body. Bloody hands grasped her ankles. The hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the masked king. A mummified face peeked out from behind the broken mask. Like the mask, the hair hanging down from his head was fake as well. This is what became of a life lived for twenty-five hundred years.

“It is over, Semiramis. Our fate is sealed. Who knew that we would encounter Semulia and Faustus in this time and place?”

Semiramis fell atop the broken face like the last leaf of fall, and winked out of

existence. And so the demoness met her all too brief end. At the same time, her physical body mutated into a lump of decayed flesh and splattered across the floor.

“When it’s over, it’s over,” said Kyoya.

“But why did Semiramis—?”

Mephisto said in answer to Sayaka’s question, “You are safe. She could not overpower you, and so her own karma delivered her to that inevitable end. The light overcame the dark. It seems the old warlock was not wrong after all.”

“You mean Doctor Faustus,” Sayaka said, looking up at the physician’s comely countenance. “And the warrior Semulia,” she added, turning her thankful and trusting eyes on Kyoya.

The earth shook.

From the terrace, Mephisto glanced down at the world below. “Look. The energy it sucked out of Demon City is shaking this palace apart.”

Kyoya had seen it coming as well. He could feel it in his whole body.

“When it comes to trifling with the powers of Demon City Shinjuku, Demon Palace Babylon turned out to be a small fish in a vast ocean.”

Mephisto’s normally impassive voice was touched with a strange note of feeling. Pride, perhaps. Because he was the Demon Physician.

Fissures ran beneath their feet. “A fifty foot drop, but looks like one of those out of the frying pan things,” Kyoya said casually. “The fire’s blocking the way out. I don’t think we can stave it off until the rescue helicopters arrive.”

Mephisto looked at Kyoya. “So how did you get here from the Himalayas?”

“Funny question coming from some old guy who goes floating around in the air and whatnot. Teleportation. One of the secret arts of the yogi.”

“How about one more time? And I’m not *some old guy*, if you please.”

“Sure. I’ll give it a shot.” Kyoya got to his feet as the flames encircled the three of them.

Sayaka asked, “And if *that* doesn’t work?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got it under control.”

Sayaka smiled to herself. She had every confidence in him.

She wasn’t wrong.

Original Demon City Shinjuku Afterword

The main idea for these novels first came to me back when the genre of heroic fantasy caught my attention in high school. Right then and there, I was seized with the desire to create similar fictional worlds of my own.

Alas, combining the awe-inspiring past from tens of thousands of years before together with alternate realities from other dimensions proved too much for my meager powers of imagination to then render realistically on paper.

But a world where magic and monsters held sway and a lone swordsman survived by his wits and talents alone—that did hold a special allure for me. And why not set it in what, for all intents and purposes, is the present day?

The end result was this book.

An area being brought to the verge of utter destruction by an earthquake is the premise of Go Nagai's best work (in my humble opinion), *Violence Jack*, in which the Tokyo region is devastated. John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* turns the city into a crime-ridden wasteland.

I generously seasoned those offerings with the spice of "horror" and have hopefully found among my readers fellow kindred spirits happy with what I'm putting on the menu.

Right now, I've got a mountain of material stacked up on my desk.

Dracula, Frankenstein, witches, werewolves, serial killers with split personalities, limbs with minds of their own, monsters born out of thought, man-eating portraits, starships (I'd sure like to hop aboard the United Planets cruiser C57-D from *Forbidden Planet*), dragons, underground empires, cowboys and outlaws, famous cops and detectives, quick-draw gunfighters (guys like *Shane*), ninjas, martial artists, zombies (but not really zombies).

For many writers, these characters wore out their welcome a long time ago. But they look at me and shake their heads. "You can't destroy us. Whether we live or die is up to you."

I think of myself at times as a kind of warlock, bringing them back to life by writing stories. And all the greater reward if my readers find enjoyment in my alchemy.

Last of all, sincere apologies and boundless thanks to the editorial staff for waiting so patiently while putting up with my negligent self and recalcitrant pen.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Bela Lugosi in Dracula)

July 24, 1982

Original Demon Palace Babylon Afterword

I have brought Kyoya-kun back to life.

As you all know by now, he was my first leading man. And Sayaka was my first leading lady. Add to the mix Doctor Mephisto, and the prototypes for all my novels to date can be traced back to this maiden work. That might take a few of my readers by surprise, but that's how it is.

Everything I have now can be found in *Demon City Shinjuku*, and *Demon Palace Babylon* continues where it left off.

What kind of effect have these six intervening years had on these characters? Much the same effect that they've had on the author.

To be honest, it's been tough writing this afterword too. Hardly thirty seconds have passed since I put down the last word and phoned "Mr. I" at Sonorama to tell him I'd finished.

I haven't thought of anything else. I can't really summon up the feelings. If nothing else, I would ask that you read this novel together with its prequel.

How have Kyoya and Sayaka and Doctor Mephisto changed? Maybe they haven't changed at all, because the author hasn't progressed at all in the meantime. In this case alone, though, I don't have a problem with that.

This is part two of my maiden voyage. Please take the time to enjoy it. Right now, I couldn't ask for anything more.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching The Monster Squad) July 8, 1988

Omnibus Edition Afterword

It probably goes without saying at this point, but *Demon City Shinjuku* was my debut novel, followed in due course by *Demon Palace Babylon*. Though I have spun off a number of other series in the Demon City universe, the original protagonist only mounts the stage in these two works, first published by Sonorama.

For the past twenty-two years, *Demon City Shinjuku* has stayed in print as a pocket edition. It was beginning to look like it would continue on that way even after I died. It has now been released as a paperback novel, and an omnibus edition to boot.

The emphasis from here on out is on publishing unabridged novels. And to that end, I've begun marshaling my most powerful reinforcements around me.

Rereading these two, I've been a bit surprised at the differences with the rest of the *Demon City* series. While the tools, gadgets and machines of near-future science fiction abound in novels I've written for other publishers, such as *Demon City Blues*, they remain at the core horror action. Flowing through all of them is the life blood of the bizarre.

In contrast, in these two books from Sonorama, the SF&F setting is far stronger. There are plenty of zombies and warlocks and ghosts and gremlins, to be sure, but also anti-gravity, androids and a world on the brink of nuclear annihilation—an assortment of dramatic devices that usually wouldn't appear in my beloved horror genre.

When I was writing *Demon City Shinjuku*, the horror novel genre was at its nadir. I can't help taking a little pride in swimming against the tide, but would have nonetheless been conscious of such market forces.

And then there's *that*. Without bothering to check things out for myself, I picked up my pen and proceeded to make a big mistake right from the beginning of my debut work (did you catch it?).

Hey, but isn't that what editors are for? Hello?

That wasn't the only one. The names of movie theaters and the like—the “Shinjuku Globe Theater” — there's no trace of them left. They've all been updated. To those who thought the originals nicely preserved a sense of that era, I recommend the pocket editions.

And yet these two works haven't grown old. They are suffused with the pressing ambitions of those times, as if I'd written the last ninety-four pages of *Demon City Babylon* in a single day.

The day before the deadline.

Of course, there's no way I could pull *that* off. But from the moment I wake up until I pick up the pen, I always have the feeling I could. That's how the writerly muse works.

When I've finished the morning's writing, my feeling of satisfaction is not leavened by the least bit of fatigue. Still, from one day to the next, I seem to hit the wall at around ten pages.

I have one particularly indelible memory going back to *Demon City Shinjuku*.

At the time, I wrote at my desk, the manuscript piling up next to me. Unlike now, I wasn't feeding pages right into the fax machine. Ten or twenty sheets stacking up beside me is nothing. A hundred or two hundred—now *that* was a pile of paper.

I hadn't accomplished anything like that before in my writing career and couldn't help patting myself on the back. “Not bad, if I say so myself.”

That was twenty-two years ago.

So now *Demon City Shinjuku* again steps onto the stage in an all-new edition, with a detailed map and afterword, and a few of my thoughts preserved from when I was just getting my feet under me as a writer. Please read and enjoy.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Escape from New York)

April 1, 2005

・魔界都市新宿・

DEMON CITY SHINJUKU

THE COMPLETE EDITION

The time is the first decade of the twenty-first century. The place is Tokyo, Japan—specifically, the ward known as Shinjuku.

An 8.5 earthquake shatters Shinjuku, destroying buildings and streets and turning the bustling ward into a haunted ghost town plagued by the paranormal and the bizarre. Scientists and ESP investigators—along with criminals, enterprising yakuza gangs and mutant cyborgs—come to ‘Demon City’; some to study the effects of the Devil Quake, others to commit heinous acts of savage violence, and still others to live freely in this lawless town on the edge of the abyss.

This is the world of Demon City Shinjuku—and how it all began.

It is now 2030, and President Kozumi Rama of the World Federation is attacked by an otherworldly demon—Reba Ra, an evil sorcerer of immense power. A former apprentice of the yogi Master Agni Rai, the only person who can stop Ra is Master Rai’s other former apprentice, Genichiro Izayoi.

But Genichiro Izayoi is dead. His son, Kyoya Izayoi, a high school student and the inheritor of Izayoi’s killer nenpo martial arts technique, now enters Shinjuku to try to stop Sorcerer Ra from unleashing the ultimate horror in Demon City. The fate of Shinjuku—and the rest of the world—hangs in the balance.

The story of Demon City Shinjuku continues in Demon Palace Babylon, included in this special two-volume omnibus edition.

Acclaimed Japanese horror writer Hideyuki Kikuchi (Vampire Hunter D) established the Wicked City universe with his debut novels Demon City Shinjuku and Demon Palace Babylon. Discover the origins of Dr. Mephisto and the Yashakiden: The Demon Princess series in this new omnibus English-language edition!

NOVEL / FANTASY / HORROR US \$14.95

ISBN 978-1-56970-208-6



9 781569 702086



**DIGITAL MANGA
PUBLISHING**

dmpbooks.com